

This weekend my mind is on the movie *Ice Age* as we ponder the readings together. The beginning of all the *Ice Age* series of movies has always cracked me up. If you haven't seen them, they all start with a funny scene starring a character called Scrat. Scrat is a little, prehistoric squirrel-like animal who has a serious love affair with acorns. He always does everything he can to hold onto his acorn and protect it, but everything around him, all the rest of nature, seems to thwart his efforts. It is played for comedy and it is really amusing to see his misadventures, but I also feel a little bit bad for him.

We see this comedic trope of the thwarting of a character's one desire in many cartoons. Wile E Coyote always wants to catch the Road Runner but never quite gets him. Tom wants to catch Jerry, but Jerry is always one step ahead. Elmer Fud never gets that "wascally wabbit" Bugs Bunny, Pepe LePew is destined to failure with his beloved cat, and the list goes on. It is easy to laugh at these characters and their misadventures, but, as with Scrat, it is also easy to pity them.

This Sunday, we encounter a pitiable person in the rich man that we hear about in the Gospel. He comes to Jesus seemingly seeking after the right things. He asks Jesus, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" This is a good question, because it shows that he understands in a certain way what the most important thing in the world is. For all of us, the goal is eternal life with God in the glory of Heaven. But many of us fall into the same difficulty as the rich man. We know the goal, but our hearts aren't truly set on the One who will help us reach that goal.

Right away Jesus tries to help the rich man recognize that *He* is the one that the rich man is seeking. The man is looking for a goal, but he fails to recognize that the goal isn't some type of worldly achievement, but the fulfillment of a relationship. When he approaches Jesus by

calling Him, “Good teacher,” Jesus responds in an interesting way. He says to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” Here, I believe Jesus is trying to get the man to see that He is not just a wise earthly teacher, but God incarnate. He is pointing the man and all of us to the fact that He isn’t just one good teacher among the many good teachers in this world. Jesus isn’t just the wisest of all wise men, He is God Himself, the Source of all wisdom, the Source of all goodness, come here to save us!

So Jesus, God incarnate, walks the man through some of the commandments, but notice how He leaves a few commandments unspoken. Think about the commandments Jesus does bring up. He mentions all of the ones pertaining to our neighbors, but leaves out the ones relating to God Himself. So here is God-made-man, Jesus Christ, speaking to a man who knows that he should be seeking life beyond what this world can give. He asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. But when Jesus leaves out the commandments relating to God, he doesn’t flinch. This is telling! He could have said to Jesus, “But teacher, what about the first three commandments: ‘I am the Lord, your God, You shall not have other Gods besides me; you shall not take the name of the Lord, Your God, in vain; remember to keep holy the sabbath day.’”

Instead, what does he do? Glossing over the commandments for his relationship with God and the call to love Him and seek Him with his whole mind, heart, soul and strength, the rich man gives himself a pat on the back! Yes, he has always served those around him, but perhaps in a self-centered way, rather than as an extension of his love for God. Maybe the rich man is out to prove to himself how good he is, that he deserves Heaven.

But this is where Jesus corrects him. Never forget that what follows is because of Jesus' love. Mark's inspired words in today's Gospel should grab our hearts: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said to him, 'You are lacking in one thing. Go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'" Jesus' challenging words for this man come from a place of deep love. Jesus loved him with the infinite love of God. He loved him with the unquenchable thirst that drove Him to the cross to die for this man's sins. When Jesus looks at all of us, He looks at us with the same love, that love which is bigger than the universe, the love which brought everything into being and holds us in being right now! Every challenge that Jesus gives to us is born of His overwhelming, never ending love.

Jesus challenges the rich man to give up the selfishness that had kept Him from truly loving God up to that point in his life. He invites the rich man to do the one thing that will ultimately fulfill his heart's desire: follow Him, not just as a good teacher, but as God with us. He is inviting the rich man to follow Him in a life-long relationship where all he does flows from the love that he receives from Jesus. Tragically, in that moment, the man chooses his many worldly possessions. He goes away sad, because he has chosen the things that will never truly fulfill his heart's desire.

Isn't this our struggle throughout life--to find the courage to set our hearts on God, so that we can love and serve everyone else for His sake? This is the great challenge of the Christian life. If this feels overwhelming, we can take heart, because Jesus gives us the grace to live that way. He reminds us: "For human beings it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God." Heaven isn't some ultimate prize for everything we have accomplished on earth. It is the fulfillment of that relationship with God which He has helped us to

grow in throughout our lives. Heaven is a matter of the heart! One praise and worship song that I love says it well. Speaking about our God, the song says: "You are more than we can imagine!" That is the truth! Heaven is where we will constantly journey deeper into who God is, because He is more than we can imagine.

Jesus promises us that when we let go of those things that we get so caught up in here on earth and ask God to change our hearts and set them on Him, then we begin to truly live and journey toward the fullness of life in Heaven. When we loosen our grip on the good things of this life, we open our arms to allow God to draw us up toward Him! When our hearts are set on Him, Jesus gives us the grace to love other people and use the things of this world in the way they were meant to be used. Focusing on loving God makes all our other desires find their proper order.

Think back to all those cartoon characters. We pity them because they are kept from their goal. But even if Scrat got his acorn, there would still be so many more acorns to get. He would still be pitiable, because his desire can never truly be fulfilled. Let's not be like those who think that the people and things of this world will fully satisfy our hearts. We are made for more. We are made for God. Let's pray that God would help us today and throughout our lives to let go of those things which are keeping us from having our hearts set on God first.

*+ Heavenly Father, thank you for giving us the fullness of our heart's desire in Your Son. Jesus, help us to trust that the more we love You, the better we will be able to love and serve others. Holy Spirit, open our hearts to Your grace. Help us to trust that with Your help, we can let go of those things which are impossible for us to release on our own. Help us let go of them so that we can love You and our neighbor more perfectly. We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen. +*