

Going Away Grieving

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I know just how he felt.

This young man stood before Jesus, expecting a pat on the back.

Every day of my life, he says. I have done what I was supposed to. I have done everything right. Followed all the rules.

I have never stolen anything. I listened to my parents. Certainly haven't murdered anyone. But I have not even lied, nor have I failed to love my neighbor as myself. Surely, that should be enough?

Surely I may be counted as righteous. Surely I am just the kind of follower you always wished to have. Surely I can count on eternal life.

I can only imagine that his heart sank when he heard the next few words.

"There is one more thing..."

How could there be anything more than that?

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Today is the first Sunday of Lent. Lent is a season when Christians around the world turn our hearts more intentionally toward our faith. When we turn away from habits of living and thinking that have led us nowhere good. When we turn to listen more attentively to scripture. When we turn to more regular habits of prayer.

And the first step in this turning is confession. It is facing with courage the parts of ourselves we are ashamed of. It is naming honestly what we desire to turn our hearts.

I'll go first.

Let me make this confession.

There are many things I would love to do. I have in my mind a list of publications I would jump at the chance to write for, conferences and events at which I would love to speak, boards and committees I would be thrilled to join, positions of influence I would welcome the chance to occupy.

These days most of these opportunities though have a sentence this. This is from one I received just this week:

"We're especially eager to find writers from the margins, writers who are Black, indigenous, queer, disabled, or older."

In other words. Not me.

There are two reactions that occur simultaneously in me when I read something like that. The first is in my head and it goes something like this: "good for them. that's right. I am glad to see them being so intentional about what voices they are highlighting."

I don't mind telling you about that reaction.

The second is harder to admit.

It happens in my heart. It goes like this: "Every day of my life I have done what I was supposed to. I have done everything right. Followed all the rules. Surely, that should be enough?"

I confess I feel resentment. I am not proud of it. I try my hardest not to act out of it. But I cannot deny I feel it.

I cannot deny that I live large portions of my life in this pull between how strongly I feel my own ideas and voice are valuable, and how clearly I know the importance of voices like mine receding a bit to make space for those we usually don't hear.

It is relatively easy to think the right things. It is relatively easy to be nice. To be friendly. To be caring.

It becomes another thing entirely when *doing* what is right comes at a cost.

For me, even when the cost is as minuscule as not being chosen to speak at a conference, it still provokes this reaction in me.

And yet our faith may ask us to bear greater costs than that.

Maybe it is accepting a delay in our own vaccination so that vaccines can be given to neighbors who are truly more vulnerable to infection than us, even when those neighbors are prisoners.

Maybe it is embracing reforms in education that promote equity, even if we fear they might stunt the achievement of our own children.

Maybe it means investing our money at a lower rate of return to avoid providing capital to companies that extract fossil fuels.

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These are the things that my heart does not want to hear.

I do not want to hear Jesus say: "there is one more thing."

And yet he does. And there is.

"There is one more thing." Jesus tells the rich young man,

"Go, sell everything you have, give the money away, and follow me."

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I bet that young man wishes he had never asked. Come to think of it. Why did he ask? He seemed pretty self assured, he seemed pretty clear that he had done everything he was supposed to do. He seemed to have a working knowledge of the law, and zealous devotion to the constraints it placed on his life.

And yet he still had this question.

After he did everything he was supposed to. After he became a model citizen of God's realm.

After he went through weeks, months, maybe even years of doing nothing he was ashamed of. Of being kind. And generous. And loyal.

He came to Jesus with this gnawing sense that something was still missing. That in some way, even after he did everything right, there was something in him that was impeding him from encountering the fullness of God's grace.

I imagine he had sleepless nights. I suspect he talked himself out of it a hundred times. He was a good person. A very good person. Everyone said so. I am just overthinking this...

But finally he could not hold the question in his heart any longer and he brought it to the feet of Jesus. Who had just finished blessing a group of children.

And the question blurted out of him.

"Teacher, what must I do?"

And in mere moments, he is sorry he asked.

Because the answer is unbearable. "If you want to be perfect, give it all away."

And so the last we see of this young man, he is walking away in grief, because he *does* want to be perfect. And knows that despite all his faithfulness and discipline, this last thing will be nearly impossible for him.

It is the moment his faith hits home. The moment he realizes that doing what is right does not always make life better or easier. Often it makes life harder. Sometimes it costs us dearly.

None of us will ever be perfect. But that does not change what Christ is asking us to strive for. He is asking for our commitment, not just when it works out well for us, but when it doesn't, not just when it makes things better for us, but when it makes things worse.

What is ultimately missing in this young man. And what I know to be a struggle in my own heart. Is the ability to think of goodness in aggregate rather than personal terms.

It is to know that the greatest good might be served by me accepting less than I want to for myself. It means that loving my neighbor might mean leaving to them something that I desperately want for myself.

I know just how he felt. That feeling in my heart, that is hard for me to confess. It is grief. It is the part of me that is walking away grieving because I know that I have so much. So much comfort. So much stability. So much wealth. And yet my faith calls me to loosen my grip on all of it.

For this young man, the journey of faith dead-ends at a cost he simply cannot accept.

And yet I have no doubt that what his heart truly longed for did in fact lay on the other side of Christ's command.

I suspect most of us can name a place where our commitment has met a cost we couldn't not accept. And so we doubled-back, to look for another way, and another, and another.

But what if the life, and the world, we long for, lies right on the other side of our giving up what we thought we never could?

What scares me?

Is I think it probably does.