

There is so much not to like about this fellow.

He comes off at first blush as so pious and proud.

He runs up to Jesus and kneels before him with all the radiant charm of Eddie Haskell from *Leave It to Beaver*.

He is so earnest and maybe even sincere, buttering Jesus up with big flattery before asking how he can secure the goods for himself, and he's talking inheritance, not allowance.

He claims to have kept all the commandments since his youth, making him either a liar or a loser, either the suck-up or the student who ruins the curve for the rest of the class.

He is the classic teacher's pet, the kind of kid that only a teacher can love, and he is probably approaching Jesus alone because he has no friends.

Jesus will judge with a discerning look whether he is a hypocrite or a goody two shoes, which is even more unlikable for the rest of us because at least we can relate to hypocrisy, and so surely Jesus will tell him what he needs to hear, whether it's *get lost* or *get a life*.

Except that it's Jesus, so he says something altogether else.

Jesus tells him to get a death.

*Go, sell what you own, give away the money to the poor...then come, follow me.*

*Stop following the rules and follow me.*

And the man slinks off to stay with his stuff and the life he knows instead.

It is at this point, this hard moment of truth, that I begin to like this guy.

He had the courage and the honesty to choose his possessions over Jesus.

He probably did keep all those commandments.

He was probably a man of integrity...a rule follower and maybe a bit of a wet blanket, but a hard worker and religiously sincere, the reliable kind we don't ask to prom but do elect to church councils.

He was no doubt a tither, with his first ten percent going to God as the law teaches, but Jesus told him to give a hundred percent, and no one is that good...but God alone.

He had the sense to choose the possessions he could manage over the messiah he couldn't.

He made the sensible choice to lead his life rather than follow a man on his way to death.

We can relate to him as he walks away grieving, because he had found something wonderful that resonated in his heart but backfired...a truly good teacher who gave him bad advice.

And of all the people throughout Mark's gospel along the way, all the crowds and disciples and Pharisees and beggars, this is the only guy to take Jesus seriously enough to walk away.

When Jesus says *Will You Come and Follow Me*, he has the fortitude and the clarity to say no.

Perhaps that is why he is also the only character in Mark's gospel that Jesus is said to love.

It is a remarkable little line: *Jesus, looking at him, loved him.*

The guy who seems at first glance so unlikable is the one that Jesus loves.

He loves him so much, in fact, that he tells him the truth...a truth he won't hear from anyone else, a truth he won't hear from his possessions because his possessions don't love him as much as he loves them.

Jesus loves him enough, it seems, that it makes the disciples jealous--when Jesus looks at the man and looks around, Peter says, "Hey, look at us!"

*Look, we have left everything and followed you...*

Peter says this, of course, right after Jesus had looked at them and loved them enough to tell them the truth: that securing the goods is impossible for mortals, *but not for God; for God all things are possible.*

This gospel reading haunts us, I think, because we can see ourselves so clearly in it.

We are a tangled combination of the man who goes away grieving and the disciple who goes along griping.

We follow and we fall away; we make both sacrifices and sensible choices.

Part deserter and part disciple, we always want to know what's in it for us.

And when Jesus looks upon us, he loves us and tells us the truth, and we are left hanging with the question over and over again of whether to follow him.

If we are going to follow Jesus, it means in part that we are going to work hard to be like him, which means that maybe we need to look beyond the grieving man and the disciples and ourselves and look at Jesus to imitate what he is doing.

If it's true what Paul says to the Corinthian Christians that *now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it*, it means that one of the places we need to see ourselves in this gospel story is in the role of Jesus.

If we leave everything to follow him, part of what we leave is our own identity...our own claims, whether to our possessions or our dispossessions, our stuff or our sacrifices...and to take on the identity and behavior of the one that we follow.

This may make this gospel even more haunting still.

Three times it says that Jesus looked.

Do we do that?

Do we really look at the people who approach us?

Do we look at the homeless person on the street, the smelly drunk on the train, the questioner who runs after us with the hope beyond our reach blazing in their eyes?

Do we bother to look at one another, not only at the stranger but at the familiar, long enough that we cannot help but love the one we look at?

Do we then love enough to speak the truth we have seen only because we really looked?

Do we love people enough to say things so true that it risks them walking away?

Do we look and then discriminate rather than love?

There are some of us who have no problem blessing children or speaking up for women's rights or being the champion of the needy poor, but we have trouble looking upon the hard working, privileged rich man and loving him.

Others of us look upon and welcome those who follow the rules and try their best and accumulate material goods, true to the gospel according to the United States, but we look without love upon the poor because we judge them lazy or inconvenient or too needy.

Upon whom do you glance and conclude without looking and loving?

Some of us don't bother to look at all, because we've been burned before and know the danger of it; stereotypes are far easier to sustain than souls, projections and politics far more manageable than people.

If we look, we risk loving; if we love, we risk losing, like Jesus lost everything on the cross and the disciples lost everything trying to follow him and the wise seeker lost his opportunity because it was a far safer bet than risking the loss of security in structure and stuff.

Perhaps the one thing we lack is that perilous courage to look.

Those of us invited to follow Jesus are summoned to look and to risk all that comes with it, and more to the point, all that goes with it.

As courageous and faithful as we may be, it is more than we can consistently handle.

It is why anyone who takes the time to look at us would never call us Good Teacher, because no one is good but God alone.

We are not good enough to get ourselves or anyone else through the eye of the needle or into the eye of the Christ.

Nor are we good enough to look upon Christ clearly enough to love him; for us, it is impossible.

When our eyes fail and our looking and loving shrivel back into merely looking out for ourselves, we must rely upon him to look upon and love, to cherish and challenge us.

And he has so many reasons not to; there is so much not to like about us.

Good thing that's not enough to stop the Good Teacher from loving us anyway.