

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, May 23rd 2016

There was an inner urging in the man who “ran up” just “as Jesus was setting out on a journey.” He could not wait until the next time Jesus would pass by. He seems to have been a genuinely good person, who had learned the basics well, but who in his heart felt drawn to what St. John of the Cross calls a certain “I don’t know what.” This puzzled him, precisely because he had always observed the basics. Much to his surprise Jesus challenges him to think “outside the box.”

“The box” provides us with a reassuring comfort zone. We like knowing what the rules are, because then we can put a check mark next to each one of them and give ourselves a pat on the back. It is the smug satisfaction of the Pharisee at prayer in the temple, who recites selectively some of the rules and check-marks them one by one and then declares himself righteous. Was the man in today’s gospel reading expecting to hear from Jesus: “you have arrived”? Now that he had “mastered” the list, was he looking for an advanced list of “graduate level” rules that he could also check-mark?

Instead Jesus invites him to stretch his heart beyond the basics of rules and prescriptions. Rules give only a minimum: a floor, not a ceiling. Sidelines and rules serve as the minimum of many a sport, but no one wins a game by just staying inbounds and avoiding penalties. Jesus sensed that the man’s heart was looking for a win, for something more, and Jesus liked that ?we are told that “Jesus looking at him loved him”. But then Jesus told him something the man was not prepared to hear: you must make yourself vulnerable to God’s invitation beyond rules and minima ?you cannot ask God to come where you are and meet you there. God must be allowed to remain Lord of the encounter. God’s call to Abraham was both an invitation and a challenge to walk in God’s presence: open-ended, no maps, no GPS, no announced destination.

That is a threatening proposition for us, who suffer from what I like to call the Google maps syndrome. We feel we need an identifiable destination and a highlighted route to get there. Can we allow ourselves to be drawn to an “I don’t know what” or, for that matter, “I don’t know whither”? Or will we, too, go away sad, because our lives are already heavily invested inside a box in ways that do not leave room for that much freedom and trust?

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