

The story of the man who went away grieving is about all of us. You can tell because after he goes away, the disciples are shaken, and need to debrief. His short conversation with Jesus dismayed them. Here's a guy who's done everything right and still has the humility and curiosity to come to Jesus and ask him how to inherit eternal life. Yet he turns out, it seems, to be disqualified. What hope is there for any lesser mortals? I bet we all empathize with Peter, who dares to say what everyone is thinking: "Look, *we* have left everything behind and followed you. [Are we also not okay?]"

The details matter, though. Jesus' *first* answer to the man implies that he should follow the commandments. But when he reveals that he has been doing so, it seems like Jesus raises the ante: "sell what you own, give the money to the poor, then come, follow me." So what was that about the commandments? Was he just playing with the guy, and the commandments *aren't* sufficient to inherit eternal life? Well, there's a well-trodden path to the classical Christian take, that it's Jesus' death and resurrection that take us to eternal life, but at this point in the story, Jesus hasn't died and risen, and in Mark Jesus doesn't have foreknowledge, so I don't think that's the point. I suspect that here Jesus and the man aren't talking about life after death but about life in the awareness of God's presence, or fullness of life. If the following of the commandments hasn't resulted in fullness of life, Jesus implies, then perhaps you have not had the right attitude. The commandments are not a checklist; they are an illustration of what transformation looks like. You address yourself to living by the commandments *so that* you may be changed, *so that* you [take on] the heart of God, the spirit of compassion and generosity. We all know that

a person can follow rules of conduct and still not be kind or generous. The commandments are not an end in themselves, but a means to becoming more like God.

This man's obstacle, as it turns out, is his dependence on wealth. What he cannot bring himself to do is give it away and come follow Jesus. And although I'm not going to dwell on the issue of wealth this time, I take it seriously. There's a huge mass of guilt and obligation and fear and confusion around our own wealth, whatever amount we have, and I can't generalize about it usefully. In this story, it seems that the man's wealth has so distorted his sense of himself, God, and others, that it stands in the way of his transformation—so Jesus tells him to let go of it. To live by faith in God and in solidarity with neighbor is like having treasure in heaven. And whatever prevents us from living by faith in God and in solidarity with neighbor makes it impossible to enter the kingdom of God, worse than trying to get a camel through the eye of a needle.

So I think this conversation is really between an earnest seeker who knows something is missing, and the guy who knows that the way to get there is by a more rigorous transformation program. Following Jesus is a way to engage the religious tradition *and* life on the ground in a way that makes a difference, a way with heart.

The evangelical writer and teacher Tony Campolo models this transformation. I know him only through his writings, but he comes off as serious about faithfulness *and* open to change. For years he and his wife had sort of a dog and pony show where she'd talk about why she thought it was not a sin to be gay, and Christians should be open and affirming. Then he'd talk about why he thought it

was a sin. It was a way of opening up respectful conversations within conservative Christian groups, but there was no doubt, Tony Campolo really couldn't justify homosexual activity. But after years of this kind of public discussion, in 2015, he released a statement saying that he had changed his mind because of his friendships with gay Christians and his awareness that good and sincere Christians have made mistakes in the past. It caused quite a stir in conservative circles. But that's not what I came to talk about today! I just raised it as an example of his posture of openness and seriousness. Faith matters to him *and* he remains mindful, present to what's before him.

So what I really wanted to say about Tony Campolo is that he tells a wonderful story about a spontaneous decision he made that I think demonstrates the transformed heart that the commandments are supposed to produce. He made a decision on the spot, not having been forewarned or having had time to think—which is the kind of decision that reveals to us what our default postures are. He was in Hawaii suffering from jet lag, and found himself in an all-night coffee shop at 3 a.m. I walked a group of prostitutes, taking a break and chatting. One of them mentioned that her birthday would be the next day.

Her "friend" responded in a nasty tone, "So what do you want from me? A birthday party? What do you want? Ya want me to get you a cake and sing 'Happy Birthday'?"

"Come on," said the woman sitting next to me. "Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that's all. Why do you have to put me down? I was just telling you it was my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should you give me a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

This of course was the trigger for a wonderful idea that involved staying up late, so I would never have done it. Campolo waited till the women had left, then asked the

manager if he could arrange a birthday party for her the next night. He would bring the decorations and the cake. But the manager said No, he'd bake the cake, he was the restaurant guy.

At 2:30 the next morning, I was back at the diner. I had picked up some crepe-paper decorations at the store and had made a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" I decorated the diner from one end to the other. I had that diner looking good.

The woman who did the cooking must have gotten the word out on the street, because by 3:15 every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall-to-wall prostitutes ... and me!

At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open, and in came Agnes and her friend. I had everybody ready (after all, I was kind of the M.C. of the affair) and when they came in we all screamed, "Happy birthday!"

Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted, so stunned, so shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to sit on one of the stools along the counter, we all sang "Happy Birthday" to her. As we came to the end of our singing with "happy birthday, dear Agnes, happy birthday to you," her eyes moistened. Then, when the birthday cake with all the candles on it was carried out, she lost it and just openly cried.

Harry gruffly mumbled, "Blow out the candles, Agnes! Come on! Blow out the candles! If you don't blow out the candles, I'm gonna hafta blow out the candles." And, after an endless few seconds, he did. Then he handed her a knife and told her, "Cut the cake, Agnes. Yo, Agnes, we all want some cake."

Agnes looked down at the cake. Then without taking her eyes off it, she slowly and softly said, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if I, I mean is it okay if I kind of, what I want to ask you is, is it O.K. if I keep the cake a little while? I mean, is it all right if we don't eat it right away?"

Harry shrugged and answered, "Sure! It's O.K. If you want to keep the cake, keep the cake. Take it home, if you want to."

"Can I?" she asked. Then, looking at me, she said, "I live just down the street a couple of doors. I want to take the cake home, okay? I'll be right back. Honest!"

She got off the stool, picked up the cake, and carrying it like it was the Holy Grail, walked slowly toward the door. As we all just stood there motionless, she left.

When the door closed, there was a stunned silence in the place. Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying, "What do you say we pray?"

Now, I am here to tell you that nowhere in Exodus *or* Deuteronomy does it say to throw birthday parties for strangers. It doesn't even say it in the Gospel of Mark. There is no such instruction. But it's what Tony Campolo realized he must do, because he has been allowing the commandments and the teachings to sink into his soul and transform him.

There is an interesting coda to the story, which suggests that Christians are

not all representing this transformation successfully. The diner owner leaned over the counter and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he said, "Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?" And Tony answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning." The owner waited a moment and then almost sneered as he answered, "No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that!"

Well, that's the kind of church Jesus came to set up. One in which the last become first and the kingdom of God turns up as a party for those who've never had a party. Bless Peter's heart for being honest about his anxiety—but nobody is going to exclude him from the kingdom of God. Only he can exclude himself, by failing to internalize compassion and generosity, the lenses through which we come to see that God has given us the kingdom.

Let us pray: Blessed and Blessing One, we thank you for the kind and open-hearted souls who show us how to live more fully, according to your nature. We rejoice that doing your will is such a joyous thing. Free us from whatever holds us back, and send us out with hope and verve to share the good news of your realm. Amen.