

To God Alone Be The Glory

Let me tell you a story about three sisters, the Poverty sisters. They lived in a twin metropolis area called Skinny-Apple-This and Aint Small [sounds like Minneapolis and St. Paul]. These three sisters were so poor that they couldn't afford the cost of admission to the public museum. None of the three sisters had even seen the museum before. They had only heard about it. Sometimes the one sister, Curious Christy, wanted to go to the museum, but not to look at the exhibits. No, she was just interested to see how the museum was different from their rent-subsidized home. The other two sisters, Mocky Marissa and Laughy Lizzie, couldn't have cared less about either going to the museum or looking at silly displays.

Well, one day the three Poverty sisters got an invitation to the public museum. It said, "You are cordially invited to a Great Banquet at the public museum. Admission is free. And there will be a surprise." Curious Christy thought about attending, but then, ironically, decided she couldn't go—her favorite football team was in an important playoff game. The other two sisters, Mocky Marissa and Laughy Lizzie, hadn't had much fun lately. They both had the same thought: it might be entertaining to go make fun of the exhibits. So, with invitation in hand, they went to the museum and were given a guided tour by the Founder/Builder/Curator himself.

Mocky Marissa and Laughy Lizzie were whispering and snickering all through the tour, making a nuisance of themselves.

At the end of the tour their illustrious Tour Guide informed them that, surprise!, they were now part owners of the museum and all its treasures. Laughy Lizzie just about fell to the floor, chortling at the thought of her owning a share of a building full of "junk." When she caught her breath, she said to the Founder/Builder/Curator, "I'd rather be poor than own this stuff."

But the beauty and the harmony and the truth of the exhibits had been working on the mind of Mocky Marissa. Even as she was poking fun at the exhibits, she could feel her poverty deep down. And at the end of the tour she fell strangely silent and admitted to herself that she was far too poor to afford even one item in the museum, much less the usual admission fee. She felt rather amazed because she had just witnessed a kind of wealth she didn't even know existed. So when the Tour Guide informed her that she was hereafter a part owner of this beautiful museum, she was quite pleased. In fact she never went back home to live with her sisters. She lived at the museum with all the other new owners. Each week more and more owners moved in, but it was never too crowded. There was room for all. Every day she would take a tour of the museum, and she would come across yet another exhibit she hadn't previously noticed, or one that she had

thought was rather pointless. She changed her name to Rich Rita and lived happily ever after.

Of course it's just a modern day parable. But this sort of thing happens every day all over the world. And it happened in the Gospel for today. It's fairly early in Jesus' ministry. He was recently baptized, faced 40 days of temptation in the desert, proclaimed God's kingdom in the area of Judea (down south), and met quick opposition. So Luke tells us: ¹⁴*Jesus returned [north] to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside.* It was during this time that Jesus visited Cana and turned water into wine for the sake of a newlywed couple, to keep them from the embarrassment of not having provided enough for their wedding guests (the Gospel for Last Sunday). Luke reports: Jesus ¹⁵*taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.* No wonder. He was an excellent teacher, and he was healing the sick. Lots and lots of spiritually-poor people were touring the museum of God's favor, finding beauty in the truths of God's Word, and taking up residence in God's kingdom.

When Jesus went back to his home town, Nazareth, he did so to introduce himself as Messiah to the people he had grown up with. He took the museum of God's grace and mercy to his townspeople. Luke reports: Jesus ¹⁶*went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on*

the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. What a good example Jesus sets for us! Every week he goes to worship. He doesn't even have a car to drive, but he gets to God's house faithfully and frequently. Jesus has been regular in his attendance at worship, back when he lived in Nazareth and now also when he is on the road. Amazing, isn't it? The Son of God going to church regularly! Stop and ask yourself how the Son of God could have benefited from attending a worship service conducted by mere men. If he wanted to know something, he could have used his omniscience. But Jesus shows us that he wants us to visit the museum of his Word frequently and faithfully, no matter how little we've grown so far in our appreciation of its exhibits. When people invite us to do things on Saturday night or on Sunday before noon, let's make excuses to them as to why we can't go. "Thanks but I have an appointment with the Curator of the Museum of Grace and Mercy. He's going to show me something important about one of his exhibits. But I can come to your event Saturday afternoon or Sunday afternoon."

We don't know whether any of the Nazarenes stayed home from synagogue that day in order to run errands or watch a big playoff game. I suspect it was a rather large crowd who came to listen to their hometown's recently-famous son. When Jesus ¹⁶*stood up to read from Isaiah and sat down to expound the truth*

and the beauty and the harmony of God's museum of salvation, and invite the people to become part owners at no cost to them, his fellow Nazarenes made it clear (as we'll hear in next week's Gospel) that they wanted no part of the Lord's exhibits of love and mercy. Just like Laughy-Lizzie in our parable, they preferred to stay poor than become rich by Jesus' plan.

Now in those days, the synagogues' worship service followed the same pattern as ours today. They had two Scripture lessons, a comment on one of the lessons (what we call a sermon), and prayers spoken out loud. One Scripture reading was from Moses, the other came from one of the Prophets. The reader would stand up to read and then he sat cross-legged on floor to teach. In the synagogue that day Moses must have already been read. Jesus stood to offer his services for the reading from the prophets, which was probably supposed to come from Isaiah that day. Jesus was handed the scroll of Isaiah, but he doesn't seem to stick to the prescribed reading. He found what he wanted them to hear—a special exhibit in his museum. All eyes were fixed on him, ²¹*and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."*

We don't know the rest of his sermon that day. But we know that no Jewish rabbi had ever explained these words of the great prophet Isaiah in such a wonderful way as Jesus did here in his

home town. Pointing to himself Jesus could tell them: he was the Messiah that Isaiah foretold, as he gave them a guided tour of the Old Testament museum and showed how he was the fulfillment of their hopes.

The first exhibit was: *The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me.* The word 'anointed' reminds me of Jesus' baptism by which the Holy Spirit had empowered him to carry out his responsibilities as Messiah.

His next exhibit: *to preach good news to the poor.* The Greek word for 'poor' here describes people who are so poor they can't even afford shoes. According to our parable, they are so poor they can't afford admission into the museum. But Jesus has come to invite them into the museum anyway—no charge.

The third exhibit: *recovery of sight for the blind.* Imagine you've never been able to see. You don't know what your mother and father look like. You've never read a book or seen a flower or climbed a mountain to see a great distance. So Jesus comes and opens your eyes because he wants you to read his invitation and see your way to the museum. And once you've been there, you can't understand why some people react to Jesus by holding their eyes closed and saying, "I'd rather be blind." To see the truth is amazing! God has been good to us.

The next exhibit: *freedom for prisoners (release for the oppressed)*. The word for ‘oppressed’ can also mean ‘beaten up.’ Think of your sin as a dungeon and ‘shame’ as your torturer. How many times has Shame held you captive and whipped you with memories of wrongdoing or of wrongs done to you that left you feeling ashamed?

But wait. Someone’s at the door. You hear keys jangle and the lock turn. Shame is suddenly standing over there in the corner with its knees knocking, looking for somewhere to hide. Jesus opens the door, grabs Shame by the throat, throws it on the floor and squishes it. He takes you by the hand and leads you out and puts healing salve on all your wounds. “I’m not ashamed of you,” he whispers in your ear.

The last exhibit: *Proclaim the year of the Lord’s Favor*. This is a reference to ‘the Year of Jubilee.’ Once every 50 years God’s Old Testament people were to let the land rest for a whole year and eat whatever the land produced by itself. What would they spend their time doing? Sorting out who owned what. You see, they were to release every person who had sold himself into indentured servitude in order to pay his debts. Such a person was to be totally free. And his master wasn’t supposed to send him away empty-handed either. Give him some money. Where would he go? Back to his inheritance. The

land, you see, actually belonged to the Lord, and the people were just his tenants. So in the 50th year the land returned to the heirs of the original tenant-family so that each family could produce their own living.

The Year of Jubilee was like starting out with a clean slate. In the same way we start out with a clean slate before God every day. For us the Year of Jubilee began with Jesus’ resurrection and will end with his second coming. Every day we come to the Lord with our ugly sins, and he wipes them away for Jesus sake. Start fresh. Try again.

By now you must have figured out that you are one of the Poverty sisters. You were too poor to afford admission. You were blind to the truth. You may have been badly beaten up and held captive by Shame. Now, maybe you haven’t yet learned to appreciate all of the exhibits in God’s museum of mercy. But you have free admission into the museum. And God has invited you to become part owner by faith in Jesus. Now that you own a share, God wants you to live in the museum of his Word, and study the exhibits of his truths, and grow in your appreciation of his ways, and consider the museum your wealth. In fact, I think from now on I should refer to all of you as Rich Rita or Rich Ricky. In Christ, you have all the wealth you really need.