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Man of the day:

The Hermit in the Desert

The old man sat in his cave, cross-legged, with a broken loaf of bread on a platter in front of him, and a jar of wine. That was his usual fare for the day. But this time, for the sake of the company, he ate one of the figs that his visitor had brought him. He remembered that Jesus was once thirsty, and came upon a fig tree that bore no fruit.

His visitor was hardly more than a boy, and he had that boy's curious look about him, full of youth and eagerness and some humor. The old man suspected that the boy had traveled all the way from the city to see – a show, something he could talk about to his friends. Yet maybe he was serious, too.

“Son,” said the old man, looking at the boy's tunic, which was fringed with silk, “show me one of your gold coins.”

The boy grew suspicious. “Are you going to sell me something, Father?” There was nothing in the cave but a skin robe for when the nights were very cold, and a cross, for prayer, always. But the boy took a coin from his pouch and made as if to give it to his host.

“Put it on the ground, please,” said the old man. The boy did.

“I keep this one piece here, in this hole,” said the old man, digging with a finger, “just for such purchases.” And he brought out a small copper coin, green with age and pitted. “Will you buy my copper with your gold?”

“Father,” laughed the boy, “you couldn't buy a handful of wild onions with that copper! My coin is worth a thousand of those!”

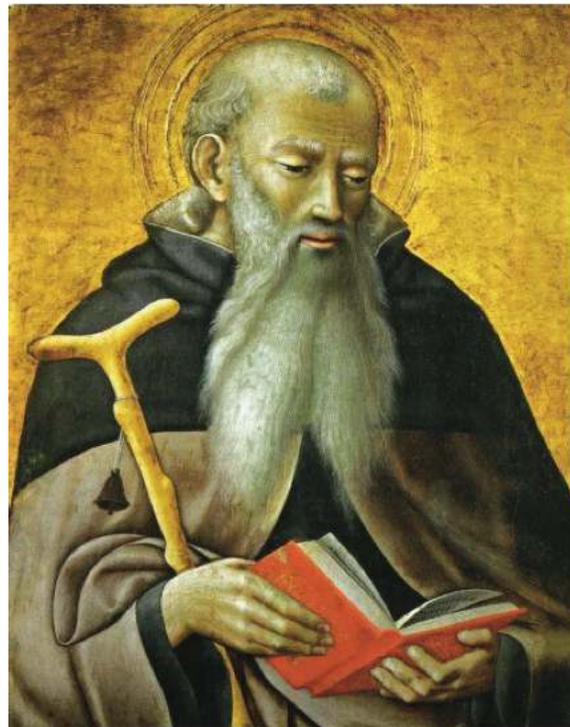
“Just so,” said the old man. “Then why are you buying copper, or dirt, with gold? Shouldn't you be buying gold with dirt instead?”

“I don't understand,” said the boy.

The old man smiled, and though his face broke out into a map of wrinkles, it seemed that he was really very young, more like a boy than the boy himself was.

“Let me tell you a story,” he said. “I was two or three years older than you are now, when my mother and father died. They were good people and they had worked hard, and I and my sister inherited three hundred acres of rich land, which our people farmed. I could have

married and lived on that land and raised a large family, if God had called me for that. But one day I walked into the church when the Holy Mass was said, and I heard the words of Jesus to the rich prince. Jesus loved the prince, and that is why he welcomed him to be perfect. ‘Go,’ he said to the prince, ‘sell all you have and give it to the poor, and



come, follow me.”

“Is that what you did, Father?”

“I will show you. Do you see this rotten bit of copper? Such are the riches of the world. How long will it last for you? When you die, what will you keep? And if you could keep it, what could you buy with it? Nothing.”

“Nothing but hell, Father?”

“Oh no, lad, not even hell. They will let you into hell for free. It is the only thing the devil is generous about. But there is something great and beautiful that you might buy with that copper.”

“What is it?”

“Do you see that gold coin? It also is worthless, in the end. But imagine – a whole kingdom of gold, and not the stuff we dig up from underground, like pigs rooting in the dirt, but the gold of heaven, the kingdom of God that knows no end, like a sun that rises and never sets.

Jesus has said it: Lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven. You can buy that gold with your copper. You can trade all that the world can give you, which compared with the kingdom of heaven is worth less than the smudge of dirt in one of the pocks of this bent little piece of copper, and buy everlasting gold with it. How foolish it would be not to make that purchase.”

The boy fell silent.

“Let us pray,” said the old man.

The Father’s name was Antonius. We know him as Saint Anthony of Egypt, who lived in the third and fourth centuries. He did sell all he had, and he lived the life of a hermit – which means, literally,

that he went out into the wasteland, the desert, to live and to pray. He was tempted by demons, and learned much about their violence, their lies, and their stupidity, and what he learned, he passed along to other Christians in words that are calm and full of good sense. He found an abandoned fort to live in, and dwelt there for twenty years without seeing a single human face, though people gave him bread to eat, by tossing the loaves over the wall.

You might think that nobody would ever know about him, but that wasn’t so. Anthony became the most famous man in Egypt – not that he wanted to be so. People came from far away to seek his advice. He inspired thousands of people, men and women both, to retreat from the world and live their

lives in solitude and prayer.

Yet he was not a sad man.

No one who ever met him would have thought so. Nor did he grow ill from the hard life he led. We don’t exactly know how old he was when he died. One record said he

lived to be 105. But that may not be quite right. It might have been 108, instead.

If you are named Anthony and your ancestors came from western Europe, you were probably not named after Saint Anthony of Egypt. You are probably named after another Anthony, Saint Anthony of Padua, which is a town in Italy; but the Portuguese know him as Saint Anthony of Lisbon, in Portugal, where that Anthony was born. But that’s all right. The second Saint Anthony was named for the first Saint Anthony, after all.



Anthony Esolen is a lecturer, translator, and writer. Among his books are *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*, and *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homeless World*, and most recently *The Hundredfold: Songs for the Lord*. He is a professor and writer in residence at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts, in Warner, New Hampshire.

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