

IT IS EASIER FOR A CAMEL TO GO THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE THAN FOR SOMEONE WHO IS RICH TO ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD.”

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

October 13, 2024

Jesus said to his first disciples, and by extension, to you and me: “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!... It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” What an absurd statement. Some have tried to explain these words by saying that the “eye of a needle” referred to a particular narrow gate in the city wall through which a camel could pass, but with great difficulty. Although it’s an interesting thought, and one that would soften the seeming harsh edge of this verse. But scholars agree that this was not what Jesus was referring to. Jesus used the imagery of a literal needle and a camel.

Try to picture this imagery that Jesus gives us. Let’s say you are out working in the garden and get a large tear in your shirt. Now, two thousand years ago you wouldn’t have had the luxury of going out to Good Will or Anthony’s or any number of clothing stores to get another shirt. The usual option would have been to perform a normal household repair. So, you grab a needle and thread, lick the thread, and make two or three passes before you get the thread through the eye of the needle, and make the repair.

But now, imagine performing the same repair using Jesus’ imagery. You grab that very same needle, and instead of picking up a piece of thread, you go outside and grab ahold of a dromedary, a camel, and try, and try again, and yet again in vain to shove and stuff and cram that camel through the eye of that teeny weeny needle! It’s a completely ridiculous image! Impossible! And Jesus applied that imagery to the difficulty of someone with many possessions of being able to enter the kingdom or reign of God.

Seeing it this way makes this statement extremely hard to understand, and confusing on many levels.

How are we to make sense of these difficult words? First off, they fly in the face of Jesus' core message and his actions which were to demonstrate the overwhelmingly extravagant and free love and grace and mercy of God for everyone. It somehow sounds as if those who are wealthy are beyond the reach of God's love and mercy and grace.

Well, Jesus' disciples responded to this needle and camel imagery with great astonishment, and asked him, if they can't get in, then can anyone be saved?! Now, my immediate thought was that, well, yes, of course, the poor can still be saved; and the majority of those who were simply struggling day to day to earn a living and run a business would be saved according to Jesus' words; everyone, that is, except maybe the wealthy and those with many possessions. But no, Jesus' disciples weren't thinking about all the other people who could still be saved according to Jesus' words. They thought that if those with many possessions and wealth couldn't be saved, then how could ANYONE be saved and enter the kingdom of God.

To understand what his disciples understood by Jesus words we need to remember that for first century Jews, the kingdom of God was a physical reality; an earthly kingdom. It was the restoration of the ancient Davidic kingdom. It was going to be a kingdom that would overcome the Roman Empire by force, thereby restoring the glory days to Israel. The disciples, like all Jews at the time, understood the kingdom of God to be a kingdom of freedom and wealth and prosperity and righteousness. But now Jesus seemed to be saying that there would be no prosperity, no wealth in God's kingdom. Jesus seemed to be saying that the kingdom of God was now more inaccessible than ever.

As any Jew at the time considered what the kingdom of God looked like, what its central values were, and the happiness and prosperity found there, what Jesus was saying seemed to erase every last bit of it. Jesus' apparent exclusion from the kingdom of God of those who possessed many things and had wealth was completely incompatible with everything they had always understood. It was a paradox they couldn't wrap their mind around. And so, they asked, can anyone be saved?

But Jesus was proclaiming a different kind of kingdom. Unlike all earthly kingdoms they had known, the one that Jesus proclaimed had nothing to do with power and position and prosperity and wealth. Jesus and his early disciples actually lived, to a degree, this alternative kind of kingdom of love and equality and shared resources. They were all far from wealthy. The initial twelve had given up their livelihoods to follow Jesus. They relied on the resources of a few well-to-do women to survive.

And after Jesus, Paul and the rest of the early church eked out a living as they demonstrated and proclaimed the reign of God. They scraped by on whatever means were at their disposal. Paul, we are told, was a tent maker by trade. As he proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ, he would often make or mend a few tents along the way to earn a simple living. The early church would meet in people's homes, or under a tree. But as the Christian church grew in numbers, they needed larger places to meet and a more elaborate administrative structure.

Eventually the church even became acceptable in society and popular. It drew in many well-to-do members of society. It became THE place to worship, with its well-organized institutional structure and well-trained and educated leaders and managers and business administrators. Many of the upper crust of society were proud to call themselves Christian. I wonder what Jesus would have thought of this.

So, how are you and I to apply this teaching, to our lives, where it seems that the reign of God excludes those with possessions and wealth. Jesus was not saying that having a financial portfolio is inherently evil. He was not saying that it is wrong to own possessions. According to a verse in 1 Timothy, it is the LOVE of money that is the root of all evil. The love of money and possessions is problematic. There is nothing wrong with earning a reasonable living and having a comfortable home.

But at some point, it is possible to cross an invisible line. The rich ruler mentioned in today's story had wealth and many possessions. And apparently his priorities had hindered him from fully following Jesus call on his life. Jesus said to the people within earshot: "How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God!"

Have you ever noticed that often the most giving and generous people are those with little means. The gospels tell a story of this, of a poor widow who approached the temple treasury box in Jerusalem one day, and she placed two very small copper coins in, amounting to a penny or two. An extremely insignificant offering. There were many very wealthy individuals that day who put impressive sums of money into the same box. But Jesus said that it was the poor widow who put in far more than the others. How could that be? But Jesus sees things differently. This widow had put in all she had to live on, whereas the impressive sums given by the rich were, in comparison, just a very small portion of their impressive resources. Jesus, God, looks not at the dollar amount given, but at the loving sacrifice offered. Many who were rich were not willing to part with a sacrificial amount of money. They loved their money and possessions more than they loved God.

If Jesus were to look at our society today, I believe there would be things that displease him. He would not be pleased with the obscene amount of wealth that some individuals have hoarded for themselves, instead of

sharing with the poor. He would not approve of the prosperity gospel proclaimed by some Christian churches, the name it and claim it gospel. He would probably not approve of the size and insane cost of building a mega-church or massive cathedral while the people living outside or across the country or around the world are struggling to survive.

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