

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte
October 14, 2012
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Everything?
Mark 10:17-31
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As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'

Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother." '

He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.'

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'

When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!'

And the disciples were perplexed at these words.

But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is 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.'

They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?'

Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'

Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'

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Well, I figured with this being my fifth Sunday in the pulpit it was about time I preached on an easy piece of scripture.

What do we do with words like these?
Words that make us squirm in our pews?
Words that convict us?

Our reading from Mark's gospel is a part of the lectionary – a series of readings that are proscribed for today. You may not believe me – but I promise that I had little to do with the selection of this passage. Rather, this passage “picked us” on this...our Stewardship Commitment Sunday.

When I realized that this reading coincided with our Stewardship Sunday honestly I wondered what other scripture I could pair with this one that might make Jesus' words just a little easier to hear. You know, something that is so dramatic that it makes what Jesus says mild by comparison.

The only passage I could think of is from the fifth chapter of the book of Acts where we find the story of Ananias and his wife Sapphira. You are forgiven if you haven't heard of this story. I, for one, have never heard a sermon preached on it...especially on Stewardship Commitment Sunday.

Ananias and Sapphira were early disciples in what could be called the first “church” that formed not long after Jesus' resurrection. That church had rules about what to do with possessions...the rule was that “everything the believers owned was held in common.”¹

It turns out that Ananias and Sapphira had some land which they sold and – instead of giving all of the money they made to their church – they decided to keep a portion for themselves...and then, well, they died.

And so, perhaps, this story would help to soften Jesus' words in Mark's gospel, but I am pretty sure Scott Padgett and the stewardship committee would not want me to draw too close a connection between Ananias, Sapphira and the pledge cards that we are invited to present at the end of our worship service today.

In all seriousness, what we read Jesus saying in Mark's gospel is a difficult word to hear – especially for us as relatively comfortable people in a relatively comfortable city in a relatively comfortable nation, compared to the rest of the world.

I read an article this week by a preacher who told of the first time she remembered encountering today's scripture. She was about eight years old, lying in her bed late at night, reading her Bible. When she got to the 25th verse of today's passage she slammed her Bible shut, shot out of bed, ran to her mother's room and said, “Mom! Jesus says that rich people don't go to heaven!”

¹ Acts 4:32

Her mom replied – “We’re not rich. Go back to bed.”²

It’s not a bad strategy. The “we’re not rich” angle is one we can use to cope with the difficulty of Jesus’ words. There is always someone who is “more rich” than we are. Surely Jesus was speaking about them. Then we realize that – comparatively – almost all of us hearing this passage today qualify as wealthy.

Another strategy that is often employed is to try to make the words Jesus uses mean something different. Much has been written about what else Jesus could have meant when he said: *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.*

There is scholarship out there that suggests “the eye of a needle” is a phrase that might refer to a small, narrow gate that was in the biblical era Jerusalem...which, I suppose, a camel could have been able to squeeze through if it got down on its knees and sucked in its humps a little bit. It is just that the most recent studies believe such a gate never existed, and that the scholarship which suggested that it did actually dates from the ninth century. Yes, this was a theory that was developed by Christians after 900 years of sitting with these difficult words and wishing that they meant something else.

Similar efforts have been made to argue that the Greek word for “camel” is the same as the word for “rope.”³ Presumably, getting a rope through the eye of a needle is still difficult, but not as impossible as threading a whole camel.

A more common strategy that many people have used when confronted by this passage (including yours truly in previous sermons) is to interpret Jesus’ words to this rich man to mean something like *it is hard for people who love their money...hard for people who are possessed by their possessions...to enter the Kingdom of God.*

And that may be true, but – as a preacher friend of mine from Chicago reminds us in his commentary on today’s scripture – “that’s not what the brother says.”⁴

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In fact, this is one of those maddening places in the scriptures where Jesus is way too clear.

“How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God.”

Why? Why is having wealth an impediment to the Kingdom of God?

² From “Who Can Be Saved?” – an article by the Rev. Stacey Elizabeth Simpson in *The Christian Century* (September 27, 2000).

³ Placher, William, *Mark* (Westminster John Knox: 2010), p. 145-146.

⁴ With thanks to the Rev. Reggie Weaver, pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Chicago for his great paper on today’s passage. (*The Well*, Montreat, 2012)

Whether you are a millionaire or a part of the middle class – the wealth that we have all earned and accumulated is what funds the very instrument that God sent into the world to proclaim that Kingdom: the Church.

After all -

It takes money to buy the food that feeds the hungry.

It takes money to build homeless shelters, and orphanages, and church sanctuaries.

It takes money to pay youth ministers, and sextons, and preachers.

Who is going to pay for that if not us?

Bill Gates has given away more than \$28 billion to charity.

Warren Buffett has pledged to give away 99% of his \$40 billion net-worth. Think about all the good that has come from the wealth of just these two people!

My guess is that Jesus would not object to the claim that money and wealth can benefit the church, or society, or those in need. But that doesn't change his message:

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 do we do with words like these?

Throughout Mark's gospel, people like this rich man come up to Jesus in search of something. They approach Jesus because they know he is special. Because they can tell – even though they may not have heard, but they can tell – that Jesus is the long-promised messiah.

Sometimes people are brought by their friends – like the paralytic in the second chapter of Mark. Sometimes people are brought by their parents – like the boy with a convulsing spirit in the ninth chapter. Sometimes they seek Jesus out of the crowd – like the hemorrhaging woman in chapter five.

All of them come in search of something.

All of them come in search of healing.

The rich man is no different.

He comes to Jesus because he believes he has done everything that he is supposed to do to be faithful. He follows the rules. He abides by the commandments when it comes to loving his neighbors. But something is still missing. Something within him is still empty. He is still searching for eternal life.

And so Jesus offers to heal him:

“...go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

You know, the difference between this healing story and the rest of the healing stories in Mark’s gospel is that the rich man is the only one who rejects the healing that Jesus offers.

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I don’t know what to do with words like these.

Even in my best moments of generosity, I am still beholden to my wealth. When I read Jesus’ words – about giving away everything - they seem to me so naïve, so impractical, so impossible.

And perhaps that is but further evidence of the fact that I am in need of healing; further evidence of the fact that I am not yet ready to release my grip on the comforts of this age in order that I might embrace the blessings of the age that is to come.

It is a hard thing – to feel stuck.

To feel the weight of Jesus’ words and to know that we will most likely never have the courage to follow where they lead.

But before giving ourselves over to despair, consider this –

When the rich man came to Jesus – searching for healing and for eternal life – Jesus looked at him...and, the scripture says...Jesus loved him. It is the only time in Mark’s gospel where we hear that.⁵

Jesus looked on this man – who wanted so much to follow – and he loved him.

The disciples ask - *“Who can be saved?”*

As far as I can tell the answer is:

No one – by their own efforts.

No one – by their adherence to the law.

No one – by their right thinking.

But...at the same time...anyone – even those, like us, who are unwilling to part with the things we hold most dear –

Anyone can be saved by the impossibly generous grace of God.

A God who looks on us – in all of our incompleteness and brokenness and beauty – and loves us...loves us all the way to the cross.

⁵ Myers, Ched, *Binding the Strong Man* (Orbis: Marynoll, NY, 2008), p. 273.

So my friends, may the way we live our lives, and share of ourselves (our money, our time, our energy), may it all reflect our gratitude for a love so deep as that.

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In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.