

# Sermon: Pentecost 21

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October 14, 2018

Year B

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

Psalm 22:1-15

Hebrews 4:12-16

Mark 10:17-31

It would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.

Today's gospel reading divides itself into three parts. First, there's the part about the rich man who asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. The second part, basically, verse 23, is repeated again in verse 24. It is only a single line in the story, but it seems to make the biggest impact of anything in the reading on those who hear it, including the disciples. It says, "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." The final part of today's reading contains Peter's reaction and Jesus's comments on discipleship. But, since it garners the most attention, I'd like to start by discussing the most controversial part of the reading, the second part.

This portion of today's gospel passage is troubling to many, many commentators. I think the problem can best be summed up as "He can't possibly mean that, can He?" In the text, that reaction is evidenced by Peter's realization, and probably the rich man's, that, if He does mean it, there are VERY few who can hold out much, if any, hope of making it into the Kingdom of Heaven. Hence, the question that so many commentators ask, is He serious?

Going way, way back, theologians have wrestled with this passage seeking explanations that would soften its message. Some of the "solutions" to the apparent harshness look more

like they were written by lawyers who were looking for loopholes in the text than by theologians. Here are some examples:

Matt Skinner of Luther Seminary in St. Paul tells us that “An ancient scribe added words to make chapter 10:24 read ‘ how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God’, as if the problem highlighted by the rich man is not being rich, but putting faith in the wealth a person has or craves.

A ninth-century interpreter made up the idea of a low gate into Jerusalem called “The eye of the Needle”, through which camels could pass only if stooped and unladen. Presumably, then, Jesus criticizes only the proud rich, or only the rich who are not extremely determined to enter the kingdom. Unfortunately, no such gate ever existed and Jesus’s words in chapter 10:23-25 fail to recognize any such distinctions about wealthy peoples’ attitudes. I confess that this particular solution was my comfort in dealing with this passage, until people like Pastor Skinner showed up in my research and popped my comfort bubble.

Sarah Wilson, editor of Lutheran Forum, adds to the list of “explanations” designed to soften Mark’s gospel with this:

“The rich man didn’t actually keep the law, so that business about giving up his possessions was just a way of calling his bluff.

The next two “explanations” have “lawyer” written all over them. They are, first: Giving up everything was a command to this particular rich man, but only to him. It makes no claim on anyone else, being but an object lesson on acquisitiveness. Or, second, it was a real command, but it applies only to the rich. All of us can think of someone richer, so by contrast, we don’t qualify to have to give up all our stuff.

But, then again, the disciples infer just the opposite: everyone is rich (presumably because even the poor can think of someone poorer). Luckily, Jesus gives us the ultimate divine out: we can't do it, but God can.

Or, if we're still in the game at this point in the story, we can point to our paltry efforts at discipleship like Peter did, at which point we get rewarded with a hundredfold of everything. As long as we somehow "give up" everything we've got (preferably in our hearts -- you know, like, detachment from material things as an act of spiritual self-will) we'll get something better in return. Invest a penny, earn a pound. It's a brilliant act of contortion to get Jesus to sound like a prosperity preacher."

As can be seen from these examples, there have been some serious efforts made to get us to a position whereby we can take the whole camel thing as some kind of exaggeration, probably used for effect, but not to be taken literally.

David Lose addresses some of the questions that this passage raises in my mind. "Why, precisely, is it difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom? Is it the temptation to believe that one is made self-sufficient by one's wealth with no need for God or others? Is it that one is desensitized to the needs of others by wealth, insulated from the normal needs of those around us? Can it be that wealth in some way distances us from one of the elements of being human itself -- that is, the inescapable dimension of being dependent on others? From the beginning of creation, after all, it is "not good" that we be alone. Might it be that as wealth removes us from the natural dependence and contingency of the human condition we actually lose some of our humanity?"

Karoline Lewis, also of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, points out that the rich man's question, What must I do to inherit eternal life? shows no connection to community for him. "What must 'we' do to inherit eternal life?" would show such a connection .

It isn't surprising that Peter would ask who could possibly be saved if the rich, whose wealth, in that day, was viewed as an outward sign of God's favor, are faced with a virtually impossible entry test. Jesus reminds Peter that what is impossible to mortals is possible for God. We are talking about inheriting eternal life. Inheritance is about belonging to a family, not earning anything. In inheritance, "first" and "last" have no necessary place. Other than family membership, all that's necessary for inheritance is that there has been a death. God has taken care of that through His son, Jesus.

Jesus told the rich man that he lacked one thing. Karoline Lewis suggests that, like the rich man, we all lack something that prevents us from the full expression of our faith. She asks, What is that one thing that is at the core of who you are, that keeps you from being the follower, the disciple, the believer, the witness God wants and needs you to be?, she says, is a terribly hard question to answer. In fact, I would even guess that it might rival a camel going through the eye of a needle.