

Through the Eye of the Needle

Mark 10:17-31
October 15, 2006

I.

Today's Gospel often is the basis for a stewardship sermon, but I'm not going to do that today. I spoke of stewardship last week. This will be a discipleship sermon instead.

Preachers sometimes use Jesus words to suggest that giving money to the Church will ensure that God will look favorably on you. But that would be the wrong message. That's not what today's Gospel means. And since I preached a stewardship sermon last Sunday, today I will focus on what this Gospel means year around, and not just during stewardship campaigns.

However, you will hear a little about stewardship because today's sermon will be shorter than usual so that when I finish I can invite Paul Montjoy, Chairman of our Stewardship Committee, to come up and share some thoughts with you.

II.

When I first read today's Gospel I was reminded of something I learned as a lawyer; something that was drilled into us from the earliest days of law school. It was the danger of asking one too many questions. We were taught that when we have the answer that we wanted, stop! Resist the temptation to keep on asking questions.

In some ways, the rich young man today is an example of that. He went up to Jesus and asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus said to obey the commandments, and then he listed a few. And, importantly, Jesus said nothing more. He did not add any further requirements in his first response.

Well, the young man should have stopped right there, wouldn't you agree? Shouldn't he have said something like "Thank you good teacher, I appreciate the advice" and let the conversation come to an end? But no, he had to keep on going.

And not only did he keep on going, but he was overbearingly self-righteous about it, wasn't he? The young man basically said, "the commandments, Oh, those. Why, I've kept them since my youth," as if it was no big deal.

Now, at this point, what was Jesus going to do? What were his options? The young man had just treated God's commandments as fairly routine. Was Jesus going to affirm the young man's self-righteousness and say, "well, in that case, you've got it made, you're in?"

Of course not. The young man's questions and responses revealed a spiritual problem. Even apart from his self-righteousness, it was apparent to Jesus that the young man was under the impression that he had to do something to gain God's kingdom. It appeared that the young man thought that through his own efforts, through his own strength, he could earn eternity.

Against that background Jesus gave the answer we would have expected him to give. He did not challenge or contradict the young man's claim that he had kept the commandments. And he did not criticize him for his response. Rather, Jesus prescribed some strong medicine for the spiritual problem he perceived the young man to have.

The Gospel tells us that before Jesus responded he looked at the young man and loved him. In today's jargon we might call it tough love. It's possible that Jesus might have thought to himself, "so, you think you have kept all the commandments, huh? Well, try this." And he told the young man, sell all you have, give the money to the poor, and follow me.

Well, this was drastic, and it actually went beyond some other teachings in the Bible. But the rich young man could not bring himself to do it, and he dejectedly walked away.

Now, the disciples were watching all this, and Jesus turned and told them how hard it would be for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. He used the virtually impossible metaphor of a camel going through the eye of a needle to emphasize the point.

This caused them to ask if anyone could be saved. And Jesus gave the answer that was still new to them, but has resonated over the centuries to become ingrained in our Christian belief. Jesus uttered the words that since have been carved into cathedral walls, preached from pulpits around the world, and even are printed on bumper stickers. Jesus said that with them alone, acting on their own, salvation was impossible, but with God, all things were possible.

III.

So, how are we to understand this Gospel and apply it to our lives? This message can be disturbing because even though it is not an absolute command for all Christians to liquidate their assets and give the money to the poor, there also are no clear alternative explanations in Jesus' words.

But I believe today's Gospel is not a story about wealth, but rather is a story of discipleship, and how it is possible for wealth to get in the way. This Gospel shines the spotlight on the tension between having wealth and serving God.

And when I speak of wealth, I think we have to acknowledge we all are wealthy for purposes of understanding this reading. The enemy tries to deceive us. He tempts us to compare ourselves with people who have more, not people who have less. Satan wants to stimulate our selfishness, not our generosity. If we were in today's Gospel, however, there is no doubt we would be numbered among those who are well off, not those in need.

But we are not in the Gospel, we live in the twenty-first century. And it is a time when there seems to be no correlation between the earthly messages of the culture in which we live, and the godly promises of the kingdom to which we aspire.

Look around. One of the fastest growing service industries in the country is self-storage. Think about that for a moment. Do you think there is self-storage in India, or Asia, or Latin America? Probably not much. But for us, we fill up our houses and don't stop. We keep right on acquiring and paying others to store things we can't use but can't give up either. And I have not been exempt from this in the past.

The point is that it's easy for our wealth to get in the way of our faithfulness. It is easier to put God on the back burner if we think we are self-sufficient and can do everything for ourselves. And this leads to a dilemma. It is a dilemma not based on our possessions and wealth in and of themselves, but rather how we regard them and how they affect us.

If we are bound up in our possessions and our wealth, then we are idolizing worldly things. If, however, we believe we are not bound up in our possessions and wealth, then we might be able to truthfully say that they are not impediments to our relationships with God.

But how do we know that? How do we know which is which? Are we bound to material things, or not? Perhaps our willingness to share our possessions and wealth is the best indicator. Perhaps the answer goes back to that well-known passage from Matthew's Gospel where he told us that where our treasure is, there also will be our hearts.

Today's Gospel challenges us, but does not leave us hopeless. I do not believe we all are expected to sell all we own and give the money to the poor. That would cause a paradox. We then would become the poor, and would claim to be entitled to the money that came from the possessions we just got through selling. Or, in a more practical context, we could become burdens on our relatives or upon society.

Jesus does not require us all to sell all we have. Luke's Gospel seems to approve of Zacchaeus, the reformed tax collector, who gave half, not all, of his possessions to the poor. And in the Book of Acts the disciples met in the houses in which they lived, and thus they obviously did not sell them.

But we are called to be transformed into something that we could never be without the Gospel and teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ. This means that we can be faced with difficult choices; choices between temptations of the world and the imperatives of our faith.

If we do only what is comfortable, what is easy, and what seems to come naturally, then maybe Jesus is not in the picture. For throughout the Gospels he calls us to do what is uncomfortable, what is difficult, and what doesn't come naturally. I raise that only as a possibility, not as a judgment. People know what is in their hearts, and they must decide for themselves whether they are responding to Christ's call. All I can do is raise the question.

IV.

It is not holding our wealth that is the problem, it is holding it with clenched hands. And if our hands are wrapped around our wealth, then we have no hands to receive the gifts God has ordained for us. Money is a good servant but a poor master. If we possess our wealth that is one thing. If our wealth possesses us that is another.

In order to pass through the eye of the needle to which Jesus referred, we cannot be burdened by baggage that blocks the way. Try walking through a narrow door while carrying two large suitcases, and you can get the picture.

We must find a way to let go of some things, and that often requires us to do it in faith. Today's Gospel tells us that we cannot always do it ourselves, and must rely on the eternal truth that only God makes such things possible.

The bottom line is that Christ did not come to make us prosperous, but to make us righteous. He did not call us to affluence but to obedience. While he does not want us to be penniless, he also wants us to be generous. And in that inevitable day when we all must account for the content of our lives, the question will not be were we successful, but were we faithful. *Amen.*