

Unloading and getting through

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Pledge Sunday, September 30, 2012

Mark 10: 17-31

Luke 19:18-29

Matthew 19:16-30

This is the last sermon in the September series “Things we would rather not talk about in church.” Here we are on Pledge Sunday, ready to talk about money. And we get that troublesome text from the gospel with Jesus and that old camel. This is a text that has had me quaking in my boots for years. But we can hardly avoid it as the camel and the needle appear in Mark, Matthew and Luke, in very similar fashion each time. This morning we heard only the end of the story. Each version of this text begins with a rich person approaching Jesus and asking what one must do to inherit eternal life. Right here we are given a clue; the rich person wants his rightful inheritance. The rich person can buy or inherit what he imagines is rightfully his.

When Jesus tells the rich person that he must do what everyone must do — keep the commandments — the rich person responds that he has been doing that his whole life. He thinks he is free and clear. And yet he must feel some dissatisfaction with his life because here he is, tracking down this itinerant preacher asking about eternal life.

So Jesus tells the man just what he does not want to hear: “Sell everything you own and give the money to those in need; your treasure will be in heaven. Then come and follow me.” For all his eagerness, the rich person goes away sad because you can’t just sell everything and give the proceeds to the 99 percent. That is not how wealth or inheritance works.

It is after this that Jesus says, (in Mark it is to the disciples) “How hard it is for rich people to enter the kingdom of God?” And the disciples are just as dumbfounded as the rich person who has already walked away. Because the disciples know — everybody knows — that rich people can buy anything. Why shouldn’t they be able to buy eternal life as well — or at least inherit it?

To illustrate how serious he is about the difficulty of wealth and the reign of God, Jesus pulls out this crazy sermon illustration about the camel and the eye of the needle.

For centuries people have been trying to unpack this text and understand what Jesus is talking about. In the 11th Century, a scholar decided that Jesus was not talking about a literal needle; that would never make sense. What Jesus is describing is the “needle’s eye gate” in Jerusalem. This was a gate used late at night after the main gate was closed. It was so narrow that a camel that was packed for a journey or heading to market could never get through unless all of its cargo was unloaded.

This makes a lot more sense, for a camel to have all of its riches unpacked so it can pass through a gate, not a needle. The only problem is that no one has been able to prove there was such a gate in Jerusalem.

Alternatively, scholars have speculated that perhaps there was a misprint in the Greek. The Greek word *kamilos* ('camel') should really be *kamêlos*, meaning 'rope'. So what Jesus is really saying is that it would be easier to get a rope through a needle (not a camel through a needle) than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

Still other scholars look at the text in Aramaic. In Aramaic the word for rope and camel are the same word: *gamla* — probably because much of the rope was made from camel hair. So maybe what Jesus is talking about is getting camel hair through a

needle. (Info in the previous paragraphs comes from www.biblicalhebrew.com/nt/camelneedle.htm)

Now things are even more confusing. Are we talking about camels and needles, camels and gates or rope and needles? The more I read the Bible, the more it seems apparent to me that Jesus sometimes uses hyperbole; we can't always read what he says literally. Two thousand years after the fact, through numerous redactors, multiple translations and cultural shifts, we are likely to miss his little jokes.

Still, whether we read the text literally or catch the twinkle in Jesus' eye, we hear that rich people are not compatible with the reign of God. But there has to be more — otherwise where does it leave us?

As I worked at memorizing this text, I heard something I had never heard before and it gives me hope. Did you catch it? The disciples are amazed and marvel at how Jesus talks. They don't know what to make of his words. If it is really that hard for the wealthy, there is no hope for anyone. "Then who can be saved?" they ask.

And did you hear how Jesus responds? Jesus says, "Yes, for mortals it is impossible. But with God all things are possible."

While we who are somewhat wealthy, at least compared to the rest of the world, we are not totally off the hook. This is a glimmer of hope. We are not expected to be able to do this alone, and that keeps us here, listening. We have not run away, alone and sad like the prosperous person in the story. We are still here, trying to understand what Jesus means. And this time around I hear Jesus this way:

When you leave everything to follow me, when you loosen your grip on what the world says you should hold tightly to — home, property, family, children (since they

provide wealth), then you will receive even more — though it may be a different kind of wealth.

Most importantly, you will not be alone like the righteous, rich person who observes all the rules. When you follow me, you will be in the company of those who are also following the Way. Of course, this will not be easy, it will be difficult; there may even be persecution.

But you will have each other and in the end, you will see that those who travel with you on the way are sisters and brothers, spiritual mothers and fathers. You will value your children and those in this larger family, for who they are, instead of what they can give you. Property, land and money will take on new meaning in this community of followers.

What might this approach to homes, sisters, brothers, mother, father, children and property mean for our congregation taking on a huge new debt? In a few months we will move into a beautifully renovated church building with lighting in the accessible parking lot, a wheelchair lift and “windows for light” to go along with the “open door.”

This splendid, new space carries with it a big loan that we may be paying for the next 20 years. While the financial commitment may feel overwhelming, we will need to keep reminding each other what true community is, where true wealth lies, how generous we can be. Because we are creating a place where everyone has access to the space where we worship, where we eat together, where we tell and retell the story of Jesus, where we listen to each other’s stories.

I was reminded of how closely we listen to each other, as we were singing last week. We sang acapella, our voices joined in harmony. As we ended one phrase and

collectively took a breath to begin the next phrase, one voice held over, a strong baritone voice, in tune but not in rhythm. We were collectively startled, until, almost all at once we realized that this was not a mistake. This was Charlie, our friend, one of us, who sits in the back in a wheelchair. He loves opera, he sometimes plays his harmonica, he was joining in the song. The singing continued, and we are richer for the shared experience of singing with Charlie.

In the coming years, we will need to keep up our financial giving to local, national and international ministries, as well as the physical plant, staff and add on the renovation loan.

When it feels like too much to give, too much to let go of, let's remember what gathering in a common space means to all of us. Last week when Justin shared he said, "I want to welcome you all to our church."

We are a congregation that has more graduate degrees than you can shake a stick at. We have money and power and jobs. We may look like a herd of overloaded camels. But we are also Jesus followers. We are a church where those who have been excluded are welcome to worship and work. We are a church that Andre, Charlie and Justin call home, where Alex wants to be part of giving. I pray this means we are also part of the realm where God dwells.

"For mortals it is impossible — but not with God. With God all things are possible."