

Of Camels, Needles, and the Power of God

Proper 23, year B - Mark 10:17-27

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, October 14, 2012

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

When I was a boy growing up in the Biblically conservative church that I've described to you many times, with no Lectionary to guide the choice of Scripture, I ended up hearing a disproportional abundance of sermons on this morning's gospel text. In most of them, the preacher, perhaps as profoundly perplexed as the disciples in our story, delved into the world of Jesus in first century Palestine, talking about the size of camels, how they were used by merchants, and how, when he was talking about the eye of a needle, Jesus was possibly referring to a particularly difficult and narrow gate leading into Jerusalem. Apparently, to get their camel through this needle-eye gate, merchants had to first unload their burdens and then retrieve and carry them through on their *own* backs – the point being that if we leave our burdens and our riches behind, and follow the straight and narrow way, we can squeeze our way into the Kingdom of God. The rich man in this story was simply not willing to do what he needed to do. "For with God," the preacher would conclude, "*all* things are possible."

But as I read this morning's Gospel lesson, I found myself liking the young man in this story. In fact, he looks to me like nearly the *perfect* candidate to become one of Jesus's disciples. Dropping to his knees in front of Jesus, he certainly seemed to have a better attitude than those disciples who were divvying up cabinet positions a few weeks ago. And this guy's lived an upright, clean life. The man comes and he says, "What do I have to do to be a part of the Kingdom of God?" Jesus tells him to obey the law, to honor God and his neighbor, to live a holy life. And the man replies, "Been there, done that – I've lived right since I was a kid." "Fair enough," Jesus says. "Now go sell everything you have, leave your home, and follow me."

The earnest young man is shocked and walks away, shaking his head, and we feel sorry for that poor rich man, who just wasn't willing to do *that* much to follow Jesus. The disciples just about break their arms patting themselves on the back, since that's exactly what they've all *already* done. And Jesus says, "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."

You know, the more I look at this story, the more I wonder what would have happened if the rich man's answer to Jesus's command to sell everything had been, "Been there, done that." "I've gotten rid of the house in the country, and the condo in downtown Caesarea." "I've sold the fleet of horses, the V-6 chariot, and that boat I kept down on the Galilee." "I've liquidated the mutual funds and the stocks and the olive oil futures." "And I've deposited every talent, every denarus, every mite into the Temple fund for the relief of the poor." "Here I am. I'm ready. Let's go!"

Maybe Jesus would have beamed widely and hugged that young man right around the neck. Maybe he would have welcomed him into his inner circle and we'd all be talking about Jesus' thirteen disciples. But *maybe* there would have been *another* requirement. And maybe another, and another, and another, until the man had gotten the point that it really doesn't matter what *he* had done... what *I* do... what *you* do. "For mortals," Jesus said, "it is impossible." No matter what tricks we use to try to get their relative size a little bit closer, we still can't put that great big camel through the eye of that little, bitty needle.

But we try, don't we? We put all our might into trying to find a way to stuff that camel on through that needle. "Yeah," we say, "but he said that 'For God, *all* things are possible.'" Maybe if we push real hard from the back. "I've done everything you've said I should, Lord." "I've been to church, whenever I'm in town." Maybe if we yank real hard from the front. "I've given to the annual fund... and to the capital drive... and to the youth group... and to the United Way." Maybe if we *wet* one end of that camel, squint down *real* tight, and hold our tongue *just* right. "I've been an usher and served on the

Vestry – I’ve taught Sunday School, for pity’s sake!” We try, and we try, and we try to figure out what we can do to inherit the kingdom of God. “I *can* follow you,” we say. We try to do our very best, and Jesus always asks us to do just a bit *more*. “I *can* stay on the narrow way.” We try to go that extra mile, and Jesus always asks for just one... more... step. “I can *make it* through that needle-eye gate.” In the end, a camel still won’t fit through the eye of a needle, and with all our “I... I... I...” we are hopelessly lost.

You see, it really doesn’t matter how righteous and law-abiding I have been. It really doesn’t matter *what* I’ve sold, or *who* I’ve given it to. It really doesn’t matter how many letters I can stack up behind my name, or how big my bank balance is, or how many people I supervise. Because no matter where I go, no matter who I can claim to be, no matter what I make of myself, it is never, *never* enough to *earn* my way into the Kingdom of God. All of our attempts at Godly living, all of our self denial, all of our strivings toward righteousness, are worth absolutely *nothing* in the sight of the Almighty God of all creation. The only outcome we can reasonably expect, the only reward we can possibly deserve, the only result we can conceivably attain for all our own best efforts... is death.

A couple of weeks ago – at Rotary, I think – I heard a story about a man who came upon a sign advertising a talking dog for sale. Intrigued, he knocked on the door of the house. A disheveled man answered the door, “You here about my dog?” When the man nodded, the owner cocked his head, “He’s around back.” Letting himself in the gate and approaching a rather ordinary looking mutt, the man asked, “Hey there, buddy, is it true you can talk?” “Sure I can,” replied the canine to the now astonished man. “I found out I could talk years ago, and since then I’ve lived a wonderful, exciting life.” “When I let him know about my, shall we say *unusual* talents, my owner took me to the authorities.” “At first, I went to work for the CIA where I cracked several espionage cases by sitting inconspicuously within earshot of some pretty nasty spies.” “Then I went to work for the DEA and was responsible for taking down three drug cartels.” “Here lately, I’m doing undercover work for the local police, and right now I’m on the trail of a big-time counterfeit ring.” “Wonderful,” said the overwhelmed man, “I’ve got to talk to your owner.” Running back to the front porch, the man practically shouted, “I’ve got to have that amazing dog! How much do you want for him?” Without getting up from his chair, the dog’s owner replied, “Ten bucks.” “Ten bucks!? Why so little for such an amazing animal.” “Well, he’s a liar – he never did any of that stuff.”

Sometimes it’s easy to miss the point.

You see, the point in this morning’s Gospel story is not so much that “For God, *all* things are possible,” but that “For *God* all things are possible.” Only when I stop asking what *I* can do to inherit eternal life, only when you come to understand that your own efforts are just not the point, only when we stop relying on how qualified *we* are, and realize that all of our starched, buttoned down collars, all of our flowing finery, all of our clean white albs, are mere rags in God’s eyes, only *then* will we find ourselves already living in the Kingdom of God.

In our words and in our works, in our prayers and in our praises, in our living and in our giving, we must come to the realization that it is simply not about *us*. It’s not *about* how well we can live our lives, how righteous we try to be. It’s not *about* how much we have, or how much we give, or how much of it goes on our little blue cards. It’s not about how well we can talk the talk, or *even* how well we walk the walk.

What it *is* about is the one who laid aside the glories of heaven – to become one of *us*. It’s about the one who was whipped and beaten for *our* sake. It’s about the one who gave up his very life, *not* to guard some narrow, needle-eye gate – but to fling *wide* the gates of eternal *life*. All our songs of praise, all our holy living, all our faithful giving ought to be, should be, *must* be – purely a response to the absolute enormity of his love for us. It is Christ’s love, and Christ’s mercy, and Christ’s grace that will lead us through the gate into the Kingdom of God.

And perhaps that camel can come too.