

Sermon for Proper 23 B

October 11, 2009

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

And so we come again to Episcopalians' least favorite gospel in the entire cycle of readings. Have the 3 years passed so quickly? This is a hard reading today. And so it should be.

One of the most important and life-changing qualities of Holy Scripture is its constant tendency to challenge us, to cut us to the heart, to lay our innermost thoughts and feelings open to ourselves. The word of God is, as the letter to the Hebrews tells us, "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword." And when it cuts us open, we sometimes see our own vulnerabilities and vanities with the piercing and all-knowing eyes of God. Such glimpses of self-knowledge can be terrifying, or depressing.

We can feel, judging ourselves against the testimony of the word of God, that God must be angry with us. Or worse yet, we can feel, like Job, that God must be very, very far away.

I have always felt convicted by today's reading from Mark's gospel. I can remember hearing it in church when I was a child with the literalist ears of youth, and despairing. Not that I grew up particularly wealthy, but I knew that my family was better off than a lot of people in my city. And I didn't see any sign of us selling our possessions and donating the proceeds to the poor.

And worse than that, I didn't even want us to. What hope could there be that I might enter the kingdom of God through the eye of a needle?

The passage has continued to cut me to the heart for years, whenever I heard it, and still does so in my priesthood.

It echoes in my mind every time someone comes up to me on the street and asks for bus fare, or a few bucks for dinner.

How does any of us reconcile our wealth, our abundance, individually or as a church, with Jesus' stern admonition? And lest we forget, almost every one of us here this morning **is** wealthy, compared to most across the planet. What, then, do we do with this troublesome passage?

Let us go to the reading itself, and look at it more closely, and with some context.

It would seem clear at first that Jesus is making a blanket condemnation of wealth: "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" (10:25). These are harsh words; but they do not appear in isolation. The condemnation of wealth is part of a larger discussion of what is required for true discipleship.

In the case of the man who comes to Jesus wanting to know what he must do to inherit eternal life, he claims to have kept the commandments, and there is no given reason to doubt him; but still he has an obstacle, a stumbling block between him and eternal life. That obstacle is not merely wealth itself, but attachment to wealth. Knowing this, Jesus tells him to "sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven" (10:21).

But the corrosive depth of the man's attachment is revealed in the language of his question – even eternal life he speaks of in the financial language of inheritance. His reaction to Jesus' response depicts even more tragically the extent of his attachment: he declines Jesus' personal invitation, "come, follow me," and leaves grieving, "grieving, because he had great possessions" (22). Only moments before, he had run up eagerly to Jesus, and now, he leaves, heartbroken.

In this story the kingdom of God is like the promised land of Deuteronomy: it is magnificent, but at the end of a journey of faith. Jesus asks the man to start that journey by leaving his possessions and following him, but the man is content in the bondage of his Egypt.

It is important, though, that the man does not ask “what must we do to inherit eternal life,” but rather, “what must I do?” Jesus is not making a universal statement. He is making a specific suggestion for a man who has an obsession with wealth, for whom the kingdom of God is but another acquisition which he seeks.

In an earlier passage of this gospel, which we read a few weeks ago, Jesus advises not that everyone cut off their hand, but only those for whom it causes sin. Similarly, wealth in and of itself need not cause sin, but it can be a cause of sin in many. For those people, giving away their possessions that they may be unburdened on the road of discipleship is advisable. Like all of us, the rich need God’s help to enter the kingdom of God. Wealth **can be** a particularly difficult obstacle for them.

All have burdens we must leave behind to take up the cross and follow Jesus, but not all suffer from the same burdens. We are called not necessarily to be poor, but to be poor in spirit. The point of the passage, then, is not entirely specific to wealth, but refers to anything that causes sin, that holds us back from the true treasure of God.

At the end of our passage for today, even the disciples, who have given up almost everything to follow Jesus, nevertheless get caught in their desire for status and privilege, trying to elicit Jesus’ praise for their self-denial. If we are to be a disciple, the passage suggests, we must abandon attachments and obligations to the world, whatever they may be, and put our faith in the one who created and cares for us.

Much speculation has been made as to the intricacies of a camel going through the eye of a needle. There's a mind-bending image for you!

Some have argued that the "eye of the needle" was a particular gate in the ancient world, and that in order for camels to enter it, they had to kneel, a very unnatural act of submission for a camel. Other creative interpretations have been offered as well.

But such interpretations can only be secondary ones; clearly the primary meaning of the passage is as it seems: it is impossible for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. Similarly, one who is overly attached to wealth cannot enter God's kingdom.

Still, with God's help, all things are possible (10:27). And there's our good news in the midst of all this self-doubt: with God's help, all things are possible. Jesus leaves open the possibility that a rich man **can** enter the kingdom of God, with a childlike detachment and with God's help.

In the Christian life, wealth is both a sign of God's generosity towards us, and one of the most powerful temptations to sin. Even the wealthy person who shares much is vulnerable to the grave sins of self-righteousness and pride, which turn blessing into a stumbling block. Imagine how spiritually challenging it must be to be Bill Gates!

Even as he gives so generously of his wealth to worthy causes, he must constantly be tempted by pride. These dangers are all the more insidious in a society which idolizes wealth.

But like chastity, poverty is not a virtue to which all Christians are called. Possession and use of resources need not be displeasing in God's eyes. We are not Gnostics, hateful of all things worldly. We are sacramental and incarnational Christians, created to know and enjoy God in all the creation.

But we should never deceive ourselves that our wealth is utterly deserved, or fully earned, or ever truly ours.

We are but stewards, given trust over great resources not by our own merits, but because God has chosen us and blessed us out of the mystery and abundance of his love to do His will.

As Christian stewards of creation, we are called to fulfill our own covenant, with God and with those in need, walking the self-denying way of the cross. Following him who taught us, we are called even in the midst of our abundance to lives of simplicity and self-awareness, replacing in our lives and in our world an obsession with consumption with a focus on covenant and an awareness of how much is, finally, enough.

And we are called to the childlike gratitude of the prodigal son for all we have been given, and generosity towards all those who need our help. This year's pledge campaign here at All Saints' invites us not only to give sacrificially to support the mission of the Church, but also to reflect on all that God has given us, and on what obstacles prevent us from living in deeper relationship with God. May we have faith to follow our Lord towards the kingdom filled with the wealth that abides, faith to follow with hope, and not fear.

Do you know the story of Saint Martin of Tours? He was serving in the Roman army in France. One cold winter's day, he came across a shivering beggar, dressed in rags, who was begging for alms from those who passed by. Martin started to pass by, but then, moved in his heart by the beggar's pleas, stopped to help.

Realizing that he had no money to help him, Martin took off his cloak, cut it in two with his sword, and gave half to the man. Legend has it that that night, Martin dreamed he saw Jesus wearing the part of his cloak that he had given away.

What is Scripture calling us to? And do we have half a cloak to spare?

Amen.