

Gospel: Mark 10:17-31

Jesus has been teaching his disciples about what is most valued in God's eyes. Now, a conversation with a rich man brings his message home to the disciples in a way that is surprising but unforgettable.

¹⁷As [Jesus] was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁸Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" ²⁰He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." ²¹Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" ²⁴And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It 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." ²⁶They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

²⁸Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." ²⁹Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, ³⁰who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

The gospel text for this morning is a memorable one. It contains the often quoted verse that: "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." It is somewhat of a perplexing one, a challenging one. Who in this world do we define as rich? Isn't it very easy to think of those who are materially rich as those who have a lot more than me? Isn't it much harder to think of the number of people who have less than we do and then answer the question of who has more? Many times, we may contemplate an image of a rich person as one who is a big business tycoon, a major entertainer, a professional athlete, a million-dollar lottery ticket winner, but again we are looking at those people who have more than us. But what if we look at the entire world, all living humans on the earth today, where would we fit in? Would we be in the haves or have nots category? When we seriously look at ourselves in this world view, this verse: "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God," suddenly can make us shift in our seats and can make us feel a little uneasy.

Some of you know that I have several dogs. The one that I have had the longest, before Karen, is Robles. Now Robles has a very interesting past as a rescue dog – and partly because of his past – Robles will confess to everything. When I walk through the door I can immediately know if something is up just by looking at Robles. Even when he is completely innocent of any wrong doing, he is ready to confess, and looks guilty. Today is one those sermon texts that pastors can put into a group called “bad dog sermons.” Meaning like a dog that has misbehaved and is made ashamed in the moment, it is easy to take texts like these and say we have

wealth – that is bad – instead do what is good. While there is truth in that, the words of Jesus here and the actions of the man go even deeper.

In looking closer at the story, we encounter a man who apparently, knows something about Jesus. The text begins: "As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'" Already, we are given an understanding about what it is to have a good life. Notice that the man uses the word "inherit" eternal life, already a term of wealth sharing. We are told that the man who comes to Jesus has material wealth, but yet feels this is not enough in life. Apparently, he had some nagging feeling that things were just not complete in his life, despite his standard of living. So, when he gets wind about this great teacher, Jesus, and hears that he was coming into the area, the man sees this as an opportunity to make his life go full circle. He will go out, talk to Jesus, then go do the things he says, and he will be done, completed, mission accomplished. One can almost assume that the man wanted Jesus to give him some doable mission, maybe like a three-step process, in which the man could go accomplish and then check off.

Jesus responds to the man by saying, you should follow the commandments. Upon hearing this he does not waver, in fact he responds by saying that he has followed this way of life from his upbringing, this directive of Jesus is not new to him. At this point, one almost wonders if the man is thinking to himself, 'Well there is step one, and I have already done it. I'm ready for step two.' But then Jesus continues to speak in the next sentence: "You lack one thing." What a strange statement for this man to hear, "to lack something." The man perhaps thought either this Jesus doesn't realize what I own already, or maybe, he even thought

"lacking" something will be good, because this is something I can easily handle. As a man of means, when he was lacking something, he simply went and obtained it. But now, with Jesus, just when one thinks they know what is coming next, Jesus puts a twist on it, just enough that it turns the usual thoughts of humanity upside-down. He responds: "'Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me.'" When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions."

Jesus answer catches this individual off guard. Jesus says because you are lacking something, get rid of something. In our thoughts it would appear logical that when we lack something, we must obtain it. But in this case, Jesus tells the man, that in order to gain what you are lacking, you must get rid of the things you already have. The man is deflated, he gets what Jesus has just asked him to do. The man further understands that what he must do is not going to be a simple acquisition, it is not going to be a one, two, three step process. Instead, it means to shift one's entire outlook in life, shift the most important priorities in life. Jesus was addressing the man's view on living. Jesus spoke directly to the of this man's life. Jesus was placing the attention on one's approach to the world and the faith in God.

When we put our focus on faith in God verse our focus on material things, two aspects come to the surface - loyalty and love. What, by our actions, are we loyal to, our possessions or our God? The man in the story knew by the words of Jesus, that he was being directed to shift what was important in his life.

The other aspect of our faith priorities that arises is our love in action, that is our love of God expressed chiefly in the love of human to human,

agape love. Jesus doesn't just tell the man to go and burn his possessions, but rather to sell them, and give the money to the poor. Jesus is redirecting where that man should focus his faith in God, namely to other people. Faith in God is not another acquisition, another possession in life, something we can simply check-off in saying we now have it. Faith in God, is not simply filling an empty compartment of our life. Instead, our priority, in our trust in God, should spill out, and penetrate into everything else we do while on this earth. Whether it is work, rest, or play, our faith can guide us in all decisions. God is interested in us coming to worship, but also God is interested in what choices we make the other six and a half days of the week.

The gospel text continues after the famous line of the camel and needle. It says: "They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'"

Notice where Jesus places the emphasis on his words. Notice where the action is of who will do the saving. The wealthy man asked Jesus, what must "I" do to inherit eternal life. The disciples broaden the question even more. The answer is given by Jesus. It is God who saves. We are told that the only way humanity was able to save itself was to follow all the commandments of God, and that is the first thing that Jesus says to the man. But the reality is, is that we are not able to do that, and therefore we direly need God. A wealthy person can have a hard time living this because sometimes, in our control of obtaining things, we can have a hard time surrendering the effort to God, instead of attempting to obtain it on our own.

"It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." That is because no can save themselves, such action belongs to God. And Jesus is pointing out that those who have much in this world, those who have a bed, a home, a job, a family, a bank account, several shirts to put on one's back, are going to have a more difficult time because, as good as those things are, they also can entrap us. We, as those who have, must ask ourselves: Where do our loyalties lie? How do we chiefly express our faith in God by loving humanity? Amen