

“Two Humped Camels and One-Eyed Needles”

Mark 10:17-31

It's that darned needle (no pun intended). How in the world are we going to get that camel through the eye of that needle? First of all, a lot of us here can't even see the eye of the needle any more because our own eyes have a condition that hits around the age of forty known as presbyopia (no relationship to being Presbyterian, by the way) that makes it difficult to focus. We would have enough trouble trying to get a thread through a needle, much less a camel. Do I know that it was a two-humped camel that Jesus had in mind? No, I don't. But I like to think that it was. If it is difficult getting a one-humped camel through the eye of a needle, that additional hump makes it even harder.

It's a wonderful image, isn't it? The only problem is that we have heard about the camel and the eye of the needle so many times that it has become kind of commonplace. It has lost its punch. The truth is, it was supposed to be funny! Jesus was using hyperbole and humor to get his point across, something he did quite often. But mostly we tend to miss all that. Elton Trueblood in his book, *The Humor of Christ*, says that one reason we fail to laugh at some of Jesus' best lines is “our extreme familiarity” with them. They are like old coins, he says, “in which the edges have been worn smooth and the engravings have become almost indistinguishable.” And “the words seem hallowed,” and therefore so very serious. Trueblood says that “we must do something to liberate our minds from “the spell of familiar and venerated words.”¹

But if we could try to imagine that we were there that day when Jesus said it for the first time, I have to think that the image would put a smile on our faces. This is just another example of how we often read the Bible, and especially some of the words of Jesus, too seriously. We miss Jesus' humor and his playfulness. He had that wonderful sense of Jewish humor that is so evident today among Jewish comedians and writers. Jesus used humor, exaggeration, and vivid, sometimes outrageous images to get his point across and to make it memorable. Anyone listening to Jesus when he made this statement would remember it forever.

The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard, who is considered by some to be the most humorous of the philosophers, speaks of the “stupidly serious.”² I wonder if as a whole, Christian people do not fall into that category often when reading the Bible and especially the words of Jesus.

In this particular passage, with Jesus talking about how hard it would be for a wealthy person to enter the Kingdom of God, that it would be harder than for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle, right from the very beginning, people had trouble with it. First it was the disciples taking Jesus too seriously. “Then who can be saved?” they ask. They took it so literally. And Jesus has to say to them that everything is possible with God. Later it was some of the scribes who were copying the Gospels. They came to this saying and thought that it was too outrageous, too harsh, too impossible. And so some of them tried to tone it down and make it a little more palatable. They substituted the Greek word for “rope” (*kamilon*) for the word for “camel” (*Kamelon*). So that Jesus ends up saying that it would be easier to get a rope through the eye of a needle than for a wealthy person to enter the Kingdom of God. And in the process they robbed it both of its humor and its power.

More recently, in modern times, some interpreters have claimed that there was a narrow gate or pass leading into Jerusalem known as “the needle's eye,” which a camel would find “difficult, but not impossible, to pass through.”³ The Israeli tour guides apparently love to tell that to their guests, supposedly shedding light on a familiar passage. But in fact, instead of shedding light on the passage, they rob it of its humor and its power. There is no evidence, as far as I know, that such a gate or pass ever existed.

Why can't we just accept the fact that Jesus liked to be playful and even funny when he spoke about God? In another place, Jesus is criticizing the religious leaders and he says to them: "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." Which leads me to believe that Jesus liked to use the camel as an illustration, maybe because it is such a strange looking animal.

So Jesus uses the camel and the eye of the needle, a very memorable, humorous illustration, to make a point. And the point is that, as he said, it would be a very hard thing for someone who is wealthy to enter the Kingdom of God. Living the way God intends is not easy, he is saying. Especially for people with wealth. The subject came up because there was this man who, Mark says, "ran up and knelt before him. The man was obviously well-to-do. You could tell that by his fine clothing, his jewelry, his manners. There may have also been other clues – perhaps servants nearby or maybe he had even come riding on a camel.

But he behaved like a man who was desperate, which he may have been. He certainly seemed sincere. You could tell that by his body language, and by the great respect and deference he offered to Jesus as he asked his well-rehearsed question: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And they have this little exchange where Jesus tells him to obey the commandments. And the man says he has obeyed them from his youth. And then, Mark tells us, Jesus looked at him, loved him, and said this to him: "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." And Mark says that "when he heard this he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions." And that is when Jesus said this thing about the camel and the needle and about how hard it would be for a person of wealth to enter the Kingdom of God.

Well, we say to ourselves, thanks goodness that doesn't include me! Thank goodness that I am not a person of wealth! Uh oh! We're all in big trouble. According to the Global Rich List, if you have an annual household income of \$33,666 you are richer than 95 percent of the world's population. Even someone living at the federal poverty threshold of \$10,210 is wealthier than 5 billion other people on the planet.⁴ If you go to the Global Rich List on-line, you can put your income in and find out where you stand in terms of the richest people in the world. I did it, putting in my modest salary as a humble parish priest, and I came out in the top 1% of the world's population! I discovered that there are a mere 51,263,592 people in the world more wealthy than I am! Just about all of us here today would fall into a similar category.

We are the wealthy, the privileged of the earth! You want to know who Jesus was talking about when he said how hard it would be for those with wealth to enter the Kingdom of God? He was talking about us! That two humped camel belongs to us. We are the ones who are going to have to try to squeeze it through the eye of that needle. Now maybe we can understand why there has been this effort to soften the saying, to make the camel a rope or to make the eye of the needle a gate that camels actually could get through, even though it was difficult.

People often criticize churches for talking about money. I personally don't think we talk about money that often here, but that is a criticism out there. The late Methodist minister and author Clovis Chappel said once that Jesus talked about money more than he did about repentance, the new birth, heaven or hell. He also said that it was impossible to preach the Gospel without talking about money. I happen to think he is right about that.

Money is such a powerful force in our lives. Getting it, saving it, investing it, depending upon it, wrapping our hopes around how much we have of it. How could we not talk about money if we are going to talk about God and about living our lives in the way that Jesus taught? How could we possibly leave that subject off the list of things to talk about?

This is a disturbing story, for several reasons. First of all, it is one of the few stories in the Gospels that has a sad ending. The man who comes running to Jesus seems to sincere and he seems like such a nice guy. Jesus looks at him and is naturally drawn to him. He loves him. And yet, when Jesus invites him to sell his possessions, give to the poor and come and follow him, the man goes away grieving.

Someone has pointed out that Jesus would not be able to get a job in the church today if this incident showed up on his resume. "Under the category 'budget and finance....' would appear the entry: 'turned away wealthy prospect....'" This writer goes on to ask: "Can you name me a rector or vicar, or even a TV evangelist who, when asked by a rich young scion of the ruling class 'What will it cost me to go to heaven?' couldn't make an offer more conscious of budget necessities than the one that Jesus made?"⁵

And it is disturbing also because of what Jesus asked the man to do, to sell all of his possessions and to give the money to the poor. Does that mean that Jesus expects that of us? Some have thought so. St. Francis thought so. He gave away everything he had and he lived a life of service, dependency, and immeasurable joy. I don't think I'm up to it, myself. I can see it out there, and I can imagine that without all of the possessions I own my life would be simpler and maybe more joyful, but I don't think I am up to it.

Yes, we talk about money here in the church. But when we do it here at Westminster we have tried to talk about it in terms of our Christian commitment. That is different than talking about how much money the church needs to keep the operation going. Sometimes out of necessity we have to do that, but mostly we try to talk about the place that money has in our lives, and how we are going to try to get that camel through the eye of that needle. We have to work at it. We have to learn to be good stewards and good givers. We have to learn to give in many different ways. When it comes to making a gift to the church it should not be because the church needs to meet its budget as much as because it is part of our way of sharing what we have and not letting money rule our lives.

The late great tennis star Arthur Ashe wrote, "I'm glad I have enough money to live comfortably. I decided long ago that, on the whole, I much prefer having money to not having it. On the other hand, I also learned a long time ago what money can and cannot do for me. From what we get we make a living. What we give, however, makes a life."⁶ That is the lesson of the camel and the needle. It is a lesson we are always in the process of learning.

¹ *The Humor of Christ*, Elton Trueblood, pp. 18-19

² *Ibid.*

³ *The Five Gospels*, p. 92

⁴ Post Standard, 6/12/07, based on Global Rich List

⁵ *Homily Grits*, Grant Gallup

⁶ from a sermon by John Buchanan, *Life's Second Question*