

Sunday, October 10, 2021
Mark 10:17-31 + “Finding Your Heart”
Grace Lutheran Church, Hatfield, WI
Rev. Nancy Raabe, Pastor

Today’s Gospel isn’t just a quaint story with an amusing image. Imagine a camel with its huge hump going through the eye of a needle! Rather, it is a stark picture of the illness of social disconnection that afflicts the human soul just as physical illness afflicts the body.

To see this more clearly let’s focus on some of the details:

- At this point in Mark Jesus has just begun his final journey to Jerusalem. He knows where that journey will end--at the cross. So every stop on the way must be seen in the light of how death leads to new life.
- Notice how the rich man approaches Jesus. He doesn’t shout from the back of the crowd. He doesn’t push his way forward and grab at his cloak. He runs up and kneels in front of him. Everywhere else in the Gospels, when someone kneels before Jesus they are begging for healing. This tells us that this man, too, is in need of healing.
- He tells Jesus he has kept all the commandments. For most observant Jews this would be enough. Yet this man realizes that the promise of eternal life still eludes him. He is desperate enough about this to seek out Jesus and to kneel before him, right in front of everybody.
- Jesus’ first response is not judgment but unconditional love.
- Notice also that Jesus does not tell him simply to give everything away, but directs him to turn everything he owns into cash and give that to the poor.
- Everyone in earshot is shocked by what Jesus says because, in that culture, wealth was seen as a sign of God’s blessing. They are thinking, Is Jesus telling this man to reject God’s favor?

Jesus then remarks on how hard it is for those with wealth to enter God’s kingdom. Why? Because, since God’s kingdom is the condition of human beings in harmonious relationship with each other and with God, wealth can obstruct that in the following ways:

- Because the rich tend to make money the center of their lives, they have neither time for, nor need of God.
- Because excessive wealth creates the illusion of self-sufficiency, affluence can desensitize people to the needs of others and at distance them from their dependence on others.
- Therefore, wealth can have the effect of removing people from the reality of the human condition--that in every sense, we need each other in order to survive. Remember God’s word: it is not good for humans to be alone.

Now you may be wondering: How are pastors supposed to preach this?

During our years in Alabama Lutherans were hard to find so we attended a large Episcopal church in downtown Birmingham. Well-dressed people from the affluent “over the mountain” parts of the city, far removed from the urban rabble, crowded in each week to hear the charismatic dean, who was an excellent preacher. I remember one sermon either on this reading or a similar one where he got on people’s cases for all the excess stuff that he knew they had. He banged on the pulpit: “Go home, today, and give away one of your extra cars! You don’t need them! Go home and do it!” I think I turned to Bill hopefully - can we live with just one car? No, our daily commutes take us in different directions. Oh, okay.

But as we said, just getting rid of possessions isn’t Jesus’ point here. He tells the man: Sell what you own and give the money to the poor. In other words, turn your possessions into money and give that to those who need it--one small step toward a more harmonious and just society. Give to those whose lives would be changed by your gesture.

I like to talk about my brother, who is an amazing person. Vocationally he was a highly successfully high school teacher at the top of his game. But due to various circumstances he now lives on the thin edge of financial viability, but in his mind life is rich with blessings. He has what he needs and know how to live so that things stay in balance.

The other week I came in possession of a \$50 bill and thought, I don’t need this. So I popped it into an envelope and set it to him. A few days later he called in amazement to thank me. He said he’d been unusually tight that month and was thinking, maybe something good will happen. That small amount ended up making all the difference between holding his breath as the end of the month approached, and being able to breathe more easily. He could not get over what a kind thing I had done, and my goodness, to my mind it was so little and barely an afterthought. But it reminded me once again: I need him. I need his peace of mind and his cheerful spirit, and this little interaction gave me cause to thank God once again for him. It brought us closer together.

I am grateful as well for the Hatfield Pastors’ Fund. Over the summer the local churches pooled their resources to help local family get a new air conditioner, and right now we are helping someone with a new roof and someone else with flood mitigation, whose entire first floor was swamped after Hurricane Ida up to the kitchen counters. None of the amounts given are large. But every gesture forms new relationships and brings the community’s need into sharper focus.

Conventional wisdom says money can’t buy happiness. I actually think it can, if we turn our minds around 180 degrees. Study after study has shown that people who give generously are the happiest people on earth. A Ted talk I just watched on this topic showed a map of the entire planet with those countries shaded in green where research showed giving away money makes citizen happy, and in red where giving away money makes them unhappy. There was only one red country, the Central African Republic, but with the terrible civil wars raging there, I think we can forgive them. All the others on the world map were green -- although the US was only light green as opposed to the dark green of Canada and Australia.

When resources are used to create and strengthen human relationships, that investment is treasure in heaven. By “heaven” Jesus means not the afterlife, but the kingdom of God -- the restoration of all things into harmony with each other and with God. Seek the Lord, Amos says, and live!

This is the world that we long for. This is the kingdom that Jesus came to proclaim. And this is the kingdom that becomes more visible, one step at a time, one human gesture at a time, one strengthened relationship at a time. This, truly, is treasure in heaven, treasure that no earthly processes -- neither moth, nor rust -- can destroy. And as Jesus goes on to say elsewhere, those relationships bring life. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also:

Text: Matthew 6:20-21
 Music, Nancy Raabe

First time: Cantor, then all; repeats, all

The musical score is written on a single treble clef staff in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of four lines of music. The lyrics are: "Store up for yourselves _____ trea-sures in hea - ven, _____ where nei - ther moth nor rust con - sumes. _____ Store up for your - selves _____ trea-sures in hea - ven, _____ for where your trea - sure is, you'll find your heart. _____". The score includes various musical notations such as rests, eighth notes, quarter notes, and triplet markings (indicated by a '3' over a group of notes).

From my first encounter with you, it was clear that Grace Lutheran Church embraces this commitment to community. Worshiping God and serving others is what we do as the church, but we need your support to continue doing that. This month our Giving to God team is inviting you into the experience of falling in love with Grace all over again. Each Sunday we invite you to spend time under the tree thinking of one thing you love about Grace and writing that on a leaf. Exchange that leaf on the tree for a bag of candy and at the same time make a gift to Grace in any amount using the box under the tree. We are also asking for your commitment card this month; you may mail these in or use the tables next to the offering basket.

One last thought about the Gospel reading. We don't know what the final outcome was for the rich man. I like to think he eventually returned, having done as Jesus asked, because this is exactly how the earliest Christian communities grew. At the end of Acts 2 we read that the people “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers....All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need...And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

Amen.

