

An Invitation to Follow

For the children:

Do you know what this is? (*I have a camel from one of our nativity sets.*)

It's a camel. Do you think it would fit through the door of your house? Of course, it could! But what if it was a real camel?

I also have a needle with me. It's one with an extra-large hole in it. We call that the "eye" of a needle.

In our scripture today, Jesus tells us it's easier to put a camel through the eye of a needle than for some people to enter God's kingdom (Mk. 10:23). Do you think you could put this camel through the eye of this needle?

So how could we fit a real one through the eye of a regular needle?

Let me show you what I think. (*I'll hold the needle to my eye and look through it at the camel.*) I can see the camel through the needle. Do you want to try?

I wonder if Jesus wants us to keep things in perspective, to keep the things of God closer so that other things seem smaller. Maybe people who can do that can always enter God's Kingdom!

If we follow Jesus closely, we can do things that seem impossible!

Let's pray:

Dear Jesus, help us to stay close to you. Help us follow you by loving other people. And help us become more like you every day. Amen.

As Jesus continued down the road, a man ran up, knelt before him, and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to obtain eternal life?" Jesus replied, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except the one God. You know the commandments: Don't commit murder. Don't commit adultery. Don't steal. Don't give false testimony. Don't cheat. Honor your father and mother." "Teacher," he responded, "I've kept all of these things since I was a boy." Jesus looked at him carefully and loved him. He said, "You are lacking one thing. Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me." But the man was dismayed at this statement and went away saddened, because he had many possessions.

Looking around, Jesus said to his disciples, "It will be very hard for the wealthy to enter God's kingdom!" His words startled the disciples, so Jesus told them again, "Children, it's difficult to enter God's kingdom! It's easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God's kingdom." They were shocked even more and said to each other, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them carefully and said, "It's impossible with human beings, but not with God. All things are possible for God."

Peter said to him, "Look, we've left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "I assure you that anyone who has left house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children, or farms because of me and because of the good news will receive one hundred times as much now in this life—houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and farms (with harassment)—and in the coming age, eternal life. But many who are first will be last. And many who are last will be first."

For the adults:

Most of us hear the scripture for today and think it's about someone else. It's about people like Elon Musk or Taylor Swift or any number of sports figures or CEOs. Or maybe we think it's about people who won the lottery or who took home the grand prize on "Wheel of Fortune."

When we think of sin, we like to look at the sin of other people. We don't like to look at our own. It's OK for a pastor to speak about sin, just not *our* sin. That's when a pastor crosses the line and begins to meddle.

In a similar manner, we look at the man who approaches Jesus and assume this is a story about someone who is rich; not about us.

But the truth is, we are rich. When we compare any of us to the vast majority of the people in the world, it's hard to deny we are rich. If we had half of what we own and earned half of what we earn, we would still be among the richest 10% of the world's people.

And most of us didn't do anything to be included in that category. We were simply born in America. We may not want to believe it, but most of us were born with silver spoons in our mouths. Our wealth was inherited from our parents – and that's true for those of us who were born in the great depression as well as those born during times of economic expansion.

If we don't recognize ourselves in this story, we've simply not heard the story. This story is about us. It's not about the rich entertainers who entertain us – though they are included in it. Nor is it about the rich ball players we pay to play for us – though they are included in it, too. This story is primarily about us – the ones who can afford to be entertained or spend time watching a ball game.

We are people who have money. And whether we want to admit it or not, we have lots of money.

We cling to it in ways not too different from the young man Jesus meets, and like him most of us can also say we've attended church since our youth (Mk. 10:20). We've learned the commandments, and we obey them. Most of us can say we're basically good people.

This story is about us.

The Disciples are stunned by what they hear, and we need to be, too, precisely because he is talking about us (Mk. 10:26). In startled disbelief, the Disciples ask if it counts that they have given up home and family and income; Jesus assures them they will receive their reward (Mk. 10:27-30).

Are we just as fearful as the Disciples were when we ask if we have done what needs to be done to "inherit eternal life" (Mk. 10:17)?

It's OK to feel a little squeamish.

We don't like to talk about money, and we especially don't like to talk about our own money. It's OK to talk about taxes and rising prices, but it's another thing altogether to speak about personal wealth in our society.

The fact remains that Jesus spoke about money more often than he did about prayer. He spoke about money more often than he did about family. He spoke about money more often than he did about faith. In fact, the only thing he is reported to have spoken about more than money was the Kingdom of God.

And I believe that's because money is more than just a "medium of exchange" as we were taught in school. It's a powerful force in our society. Money is a rival god to the God we claim to worship.

"In God We Trust" is printed on our money, but the truth is money has become our god. It's money we trust. And money is an all-consuming god. Jesus was right when he said we cannot serve God and mammon (Mt. 6:24). They are rival gods who want our everything.

I've said many times before that I don't believe money should make our decisions, especially not in the church. When money makes our decisions, money has become the god we serve.

Those who have no money as well as those who have plenty of money can fall prey to the power of this false god.

- Those who have no money can just as easily spend their lives wishing they had money or pursuing money as if it were the solution to their problems.
- And those who have more money than they can count can just as easily spend their lives looking at the bottom line when they make decisions.

In either case, money is making their decisions. Money has become their god.

I challenge you to take that standard to measure your own lives. Which god do *you* serve? How do you make decisions in your life?

I confess my own guilt at this point. While I have tried to live my life differently, I can still name times in my life – and some of them have been fairly recent – when money made a decision for me.

We are all guilty.

The question then becomes, what are we to do? We are wealthy, but we want to serve God – the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Mary and Joseph and Jesus and Peter and John and Paul.

What are we to do? "What must we do to obtain eternal life?" as the rich young man names it (Mk. 10:17).

The truth is, we cannot; not as long as money makes a claim on our lives.

There was a 'made for TV' movie that came out in 1987 that caught my attention then and still reverberates, but not for the reasons some people might expect. It was called, "Murder Ordained," based on the true story of a pastor in Emporia who murdered his wife so he could marry his secretary.

One of the key characters in the movie is a State Trooper who doesn't believe the pastor's story and keeps searching for the truth – even though most people try to stop the investigation. In an early scene, where the policeman's character is still being developed, the trooper stops a speeding motorist. The motorist is driving an expensive car and wearing an expensive suit. The policeman gives the ticket to the man to sign. But when he passes it back to the cop, there is a \$50-bill clipped to the ticket.

The officer asks, "Is this yours?" The man replies, "no." "It's not mine, either," says the cop as he throws it into the wind and watches it blow across the flint hills.

The point is being made that this police officer cannot be bribed because money is not his god. He responds to a higher calling than that.

You see, money you give away has no hold over you. One of the best ways to become free of the power money is to give it away. Give enough away that you are no longer bound by the money you have and can instead respond to God's will for you and your money.

I believe that's why Jesus tells the young man to sell all he has and give it away (Mk. 10:21).

At the same time, I believe it is possible to have wealth and to serve God. I mean, Luke tells us that Jesus depends upon some wealthy women to support him in his ministry (Lk. 8:1-3).

The difference comes from learning to use money without serving it. It's a matter of having possessions without being possessed by them.

When I first started using a smart phone, I was adamant that I would not allow that tool to become my master. I had seen too many people who wrapped their lives around a machine – whether it was a car or a boat or a computer. I was not going to let that happen with my phone.

And then I realize that like many people, I find myself turning to my phone when there is a pause in my day, when there is a lull in the conversation, even during commercials when I'm watching TV.

My phone is an important tool in my ministry; there is no doubt about that. But it is only a tool; it is not my master – although I periodically need to remind myself to set it down so that it doesn't worm it's way into a larger role in my life.

When we get to that point in our lives with money, when we are aware of it's tempting pull but maintain healthy boundaries, God can come in and offer us the gift that cannot be bought. God comes in and claims us as children. And as God's children, we inherit the riches of God.

We cannot inherit anything from God except by grace. As long as we serve other gods – including the god of money – we cannot experience that grace.

As I suggested with the children this morning, it's about keeping our perspective, keeping God in the foreground rather than the background. When God is closer to us than our money, closer to us than our phone, closer to us than our family, closer to us than whatever is important in our lives, then we can see those things more clearly as gifts from God.

Some of you have said it before in other contexts, but it really fits in this one. It's the simple saying about trust: Let go and let God.

As long as we cling to our wealth, God cannot enter our lives.

When we learn to let go, we will find untold riches.

Thanks be to God.

Lenten Communion:

The Worship Commission has invited us to celebrate communion each week during Lent as a community discipline. Each week we will offer a variation in how it is served as a means of exploring different facets of our celebration.

Today, we will be serving Communion in the pews. It is a reminder that Jesus came for each of us, where we are. We don't need to do anything to be welcomed at the table Jesus sets, he does all the work for us.

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