



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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Which Way to the Kingdom?

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 14, 2012

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Hebrews 4:12-16 and Mark 10:17-31

I heard this story this week: A church group invited a wealthy member to speak at one of its meetings. The wealthy man gave an inspiring talk about his faith journey, telling how many years before, when he was struggling to get started and the church was collecting money to support a mission project, he had been moved to give all he had. He had opened his wallet and put everything he had in the offering plate: one \$5 bill. The man said he had trusted God, he had given everything he had, and he believed God had rewarded his faithfulness by making him a wealthy man. As the audience began to nod and even to applaud, someone called out from the back row, "I dare you to do it again!"

How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! . . . 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.

I want to be clear up front: this is NOT "the stewardship sermon." At a former parish, the date the rector planned to give "the stewardship sermon" was kept a closely guarded secret, because if parishioners knew, they'd arrange to be absent on that date. When they couldn't find out the date, then they'd come to church each Sunday in October-November with a visible wariness, wondering if today would be The Day they were asked for money, or guilty, or pressured into giving to the church.

We at St. Bart's are saved from that particular seasonal dread, because we talk about money and stewardship year-round! It's been said that money is the last taboo subject in our culture. Actually, I think the last taboo subject is socio-economic class. These verses touch on both. And both are hard and awkward to talk about. I think these are some of the toughest verses in the whole Bible to hear. They are clear and direct. Jesus likely really did say these things, so we need to take them seriously.

In fact, these verses are so hard to hear that for hundreds of years scholars have tried to make them say something else. One group proposed that the Greek word for camel had been mistranslated—that the word really was "rope." Well, yes, it is easier for a rope to go through the eye of a needle than for a whole camel to go through, and theoretically possible if you take each individual strand of the rope and put it through. But that's not the point.

Another group tried to make the verses less difficult by interpreting the "Eye of the Needle" to mean the name of a very small gate in the city wall around Jerusalem. Once the large main gates were closed, the only way to enter was through this small gate. The only way to get your camel through would be to unload it and get the camel to bow or kneel down and squeeze through. However, there is no evidence that that little gate was ever called "the Eye of the Needle," and that's not the point either.

These efforts to soften Jesus' words didn't hold up; they actually undermined his point. What Jesus is showing as ridiculously *impossible*, these alternate interpretations downgrade to difficult but remotely possible.

How do we take Jesus' words seriously, but not literally? If all of us sold everything we have and gave the money to the poor (note: to the poor, not the church), how would we live? Who would take care of us? How would that be helpful? Early Christian communities did live like this for a while, holding all things in common, but as has been pointed out, that way of living didn't last very long.

What is it Jesus is saying is impossible? For someone who is rich or has wealth to enter the kingdom of God.

When I read these verses, there's a part of me that says to God, "Hmmm . . . I'd sure like to have this problem one day—I'd like to be rich and see what I'd do." But when I'm honest with myself, I know that, maybe not by New York City standards but by most of the world's standards, I am wealthy. Most of us here today are wealthy by the world's standards of possessions and money.

Having money or being wealthy isn't bad in itself. It's not money that's said to be the root of all evil; it's the *love* of money that's said to be the root of all evil. The early Christian churches would not have survived or spread without the generosity of their wealthy members. Heaven knows our own church of St. Bart's would not survive, much less thrive, without the generosity of all of us, wealthy and less wealthy alike.

I think the dangers with wealth/possessions/money are that they can absorb all our energy and time, and that they have a tendency to insulate us from our neighbors and brothers and sisters, especially those who are poor. If one has a lot of assets, it can take a lot of time and energy to manage them, or visit them, or enjoy them.

We tend to live with those of similar wealth—our apartment rental offices and co-op boards do a good job of seeing to that. If I live here (here being my own apartment building, or neighborhood, or part of the country or world), I can become myopic and forgetful of those who live and struggle outside my little world.

Living as we do in New York City where people of all different wealth levels are crowded in together, it might seem easier for us to perceive the parallel economic universes, but it's still amazingly easy to ignore "the poor." Two simple examples: If

I'm lucky enough to snag a cab in pouring rain, I don't think much about the bike messenger who has to ride in the downpour to earn his living, or the people trudging through the puddles, or the person trying to shelter himself in a cardboard box. The rare times I fly First or Business Class, I don't think much about the people in Coach.

Wealth/money can have a way of insulating us, of separating us, of stratifying us. It always has, and it will always have that potential. It has also always had—and always will have—tremendous power for doing good.

So what is the Kingdom of God? Now there's the \$64,000 question! When our Bible Study group discussed this passage this week, we observed that "eternal life" and "the Kingdom of God" are often thought about and talked about in terms of the future, as a place or quality of life that occurs after you die, in the next world, etc. Some of us grew up with that image of "the afterlife" where/when things will be better than they are now, where/when the sufferings of this time will be no more, where/when injustices in this world will be righted.

But Jesus keeps giving a different image of the Kingdom of God. "The Kingdom of God is within you." "The Kingdom of God has come very near to you." This Kingdom of God is a spiritual realm over which God reigns, where God's will is being fulfilled on Earth. We say that every time we gather: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The Kingdom of God is already here. We catch glimpses of it every once in a while, or may find ourselves standing right in the middle of it, even for a moment. It's already here, and it's not completely here yet.

I have to believe that whenever we are able to un-insulate ourselves, when we truly see our neighbors and brothers and sisters, especially our poor neighbors and brothers and sisters, and act with compassion toward them, when we are able to share what we have with those in need, then we find ourselves, even for a moment, standing right in the middle of the Kingdom of God.

That said, entering the Kingdom of God is not up to us alone. We can't do it only by our own efforts. Remember our Baptism Covenant promises? Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? [BCP p. 305] To each we answer, "I will, with God's help." *With God's help.*

Sometimes, maybe more by God's grace than our own efforts, we do manage to get out of our own way and suddenly we find ourselves standing in the Kingdom. Last week, in an overly busy week (read: a wealth of things to do, all good), I was shocked/astounded/delighted to find myself in the Kingdom of God over and over again. I found myself there when:

- I heard a friend in her 70's describe a fountain of surprising new life bubbling up within her, with her face glowing and eyes sparkling as she told me about it.
- I saw several strangers, each in the grip of her/his own grief, reach out to each other and realize their healing had begun.
- A wedding couple told me after we'd spent an hour planning their wedding service, "That was really fun! I can't wait to get married!"
- A 9-year-old danced into my office (of his own free will!) and proved one of the most delightful conversationalists I've met in a while.
- A teacher finished leading a series of demanding classes and, rather than being exhausted, said with shining eyes, "I've LOVED doing this!"
- I watched my colleagues from different departments bring their best selves to a meeting and resolve a complex problem together with intelligence and good will, with the solution being greater than any of our individual departments.
- I enjoyed a beautiful fall day with a dear friend, and our spontaneous lunch turned into a feast.

"For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." Maybe that's the real point of this gospel.

We cannot *do* anything to make God love us any more than God already loves us; we cannot *do* anything to make God love us any less than God already loves us. We who have wealth and money and power are used to being able to *do* or *have done* for us what we need and want. We are not used to being dependent on others. Children know something about being dependent on others. You may remember the connection between children and the Kingdom of God . . .

Can we trust that we can depend on God? What a remarkable image from the Letter to the Hebrews: "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

Before God we are naked and laid bare; we are utterly vulnerable. We are utterly known. God searches us out and knows us, as the Psalmist reminds us [Psalm 139, BCP p. 794]. There is nowhere we can go where God is not with us and for us.

When we find ourselves naked and laid bare before God, our good and our bad and everything in between, we can trust that we will receive mercy and find grace—mercy and grace without measure.

When we trust that way, then we'll know that we have entered the kingdom of God.

Amen.

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