

## Proper 23, Pentecost XIX October 11, 2009

That poor camel. Folks who are made uncomfortable by this bit of Scripture (and *lots* of folks are made uncomfortable by this bit of Scripture) have tried all sorts of ways to do the poor beast in. It's no wonder, just use your imagination, the way Jesus' hearers did. Imagine a camel. Imagine the eye of a needle, even a big needle. Nope. No way. It not only doesn't fit, it's silly to try and hilarious to watch. That's the point. And we are rich. At least, if 99% of the people in Jesus' day (or most any other day for that matter) were to describe what rich people have and what poor people do not have, what rich people worry about and what poor people worry about, then we are rich. Each of us. Again, imagine the camel—the eye of a needle. Nope. So folks get uncomfortable.

Through the centuries, there have been some wonderful attempts to dispose of this troublesome beast. Very early on, someone (probably someone rich) noticed that there was, in Greek, only one letter's difference between the word for camel and the word for rope. (kamlós, and kamílos ). Rejoicing! It's not really about a camel, it's about a rope! Next thing you know, there are solemn reflections on how fine and pointed and single-minded a rope has to be to get through the eye of a needle. Wrong. That's not what Jesus said. Camel, yes, rope, no.

Then, around the year 800, some anonymous commentator (who was also probably rich and who simply couldn't stand it any more) dreamed up a brand new gate in the city wall of Jerusalem. He named it, quite conveniently, "The Needle's Eye." and he said it was a little bitty gate, just barely big enough for a camel, with all its baggage stripped away, to scrunch down and squeeze through—maybe on its knees.

More rejoicing; and ever since *this* handy bit of fiction there have been thousands of reflections, sermons and solemn meditations on how appropriately humbling and edifying it must be to squeeze down into a small enough bunch to get you and your camel (or your rope) through that little gate. Wrong; no such gate. Instead—Camel; Eye of a needle.

These frantic and dishonest attempt to avoid Jesus' potent point about wealth show how important, and how difficult, both this story, and this topic, really are. As a rule, we don't much like it when other people talk about our money, not even when Jesus talks about our money. We think it's really none of their business; and that they should leave us alone—or talk about something else.

Like the rich young man in the story we just heard, we don't mind when Jesus talks about the commandments—Jesus is *supposed* to talk about the commandments. That sort of morality is expected. But when Jesus goes this next step, well, that's gone to meddling. So the rich young man walked. He turned his back and walked—he felt bad about it, but not bad enough.

And Jesus watched. Notice that. | Jesus didn't run after him saying, “hey, wait a minute, I was only kidding; we can work something out.” Jesus didn't offer a no-risk trial period of being a disciple before the guy *really* had to sell his fig trees or his vineyards or his goats or whatever. And Jesus didn't guarantee “double your happiness back” if the fellow would only give it a try. Instead, Jesus just stood there and watched.

Now, I don't think there is exactly a moral to this story, at least not mainly. Mainly there are these images for us to ponder. The camel and the needle, the man's back to Jesus.

But if there must be a moral to this story, it's simply that Jesus knows that our relationship with money is one of the most important relationships in our lives. The way we handle our money is very important. The way we get our money, and what we do with it once we have it—these are moral issues that live at the very center of the Christian life.

In fact, Jesus spent more time talking about issues around money than about any other moral concern—much more time than he spent talking about sex or gluttony or pride or having correct beliefs or not being a hypocrite. Jesus talked most about God and the kingdom of God. After that, he talked most about money. Then, as now, that wasn't always real popular.

Now, every preacher in America who preaches a sermon that mentions money has to stop about now and say that the point here is not that money and wealth are bad in themselves. We have to stop and say this largely because, as I said, from any perspective other than our own, we are all very wealthy, and we all have *a lot* of money. So preachers, who tend to have about the same instinct for self-preservation as everybody else, know that about now we have to say that money and wealth are not bad in themselves. And that's correct; they are not. But just in case we are tempted to embrace that reassuring bit of news and stop there, remember the Old Testament Prophets' words about how the economic injustices of a society can bring the wrath of God down upon that whole society. And remember that much-maligned camel.

In addition, everybody who preaches on this passage in America also has to say about now that Jesus is *not* requiring that, each and every one of us, in order to be a real Christian, has to go out and sell all we own and give the money to the poor.

I guess we have to say that just to show that we're not entirely stupid; and that we understand something of the real world. | And, of course, that's true, too. We don't have to do that. The fundamental issue is not what we have, it's what has us. On the other hand, from the beginnings of the Church, multitudes of people, including saints from Benedict to Francis to Mother Teresa, have in fact heard in those words of Jesus to the rich young man both a direction and a command for their own lives—and they have lived that out, and have vastly enriched both their own souls and all the world. So, who knows, maybe Jesus is talking directly and literally to someone even today.

What remains from all of this is that there is laid upon all of us a burden and a judgment about money, and there is no getting around that. Jesus very much cares about how our souls are shaped, about what is central to our lives and what it looks like to be faithful to that center.

Another thing: Even though our annual Stewardship Campaign quite conveniently begins this week, this is not primarily a sermon about giving. The burden and the judgment we share about money is not for sale. There is much to be said for giving, especially for proportional giving, where we give a proportion of our income with the biblical tithe of 10% as the goal. Our General Convention, and our Diocese, have frequently said that this is the norm for Christian giving. I do it and I support it and I recommend it. It's a spiritual discipline that's good for us in a number of ways; it can help mend our souls and open our lives. And giving is one of the most potent ways we can engage the power that money has over us.

But giving, even tithing, doesn't buy us exemption from God's concerns about how we use what we have. Jesus didn't tell the rich young man to give away 10% of his wealth and the issue would be settled. After all, the rich young man was *already tithing* when he came up to Jesus.

Although it's a heck of a good place to start, the tithe only addresses the first 10% of the issues around morality and money. The other 90% is still there.

So, we are left with a couple of images, and with a promise. The images are clear enough—there is the rich young man waking away as Jesus stands silently and watches. And there is that poor camel, trying to fit through the eye of a needle. We need to pay attention to those images, and let them work on us, quietly and deeply.

At the same time, out of the blue, Jesus also gives a promise—a promise that is just as literal, and that is said with just as much conviction, as his words about the camel. Jesus gives a promise that is simply there, totally unexplained and unelaborated, but there. The Lord insists that, for mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for with God, all things are possible.