

Amos 5: 6-15
Hebrews 4: 12-16
Mark 10: 17-27

All Things Are Possible
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A man who was well-versed in the Scriptures had a dream that he was talking with God. He said, "God, what is a million years like to you?" God replies, "A million years is but a minute to me." The man then asked, "God, what is a million dollars to you?" God responded, "A million dollars is like one penny to me." The man then thought he would be clever, and he asked God, "God, can I borrow a penny?" And God answered, "Sure, give me a minute."

I suppose I could spend a whole sermon making jokes about the Bible, either at the expense of religion or of believers in religion. In fact, some Bible passages are jokes in themselves. The question is whether we can actually identify a 2000-year-old joke, or whether the subject at hand is indeed a laughing matter.

The Gospel reading this morning is a very inconvenient story for First World Christians. Since the average US household income puts us (collectively) in the top 10% of the world's richest people, we might like to know what, exactly, Jesus was saying to that rich man. Or, maybe more importantly, what he said to his disciples once the rich man went away, shocked and grieving. He said, "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!" Let's try to read this clearly and fearlessly. Ernesto Tinajero, a theological blogger, wrote: "If you read the Bible and it does not challenge you, then you are reading yourself and not the Bible."

There have been a lot of attempts over the years to tone down this passage. It is inconvenient, so we could ignore it, or hope that Jesus was making a joke, or hope that experts in ancient Greek or biblical archeology can find us a loophole. Here are a few approaches that have been made:

One: the "Eye of the Needle" was a gate in ancient Jerusalem: a narrow gate for camels. The owner would have to unload all the baggage and maybe even get the camel down on its knees to crawl through. So it isn't impossible for a rich person to enter the Kingdom – they just have to do so on their knees. Unfortunately, no archeological evidence has been found for a gate named this or like this. Nice try.

Two: The "camel" was a particular type of fisherman's knot. So it is not impossible for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven – they just need to get untangled first. Of course the idea that this name for a knot existed in the first century is completely made up. Nice try.

Three: This one is similar. The word "camel" is a mistranslation of the Greek word for rope. So we are talking about a rope going through the eye of a needle –really, really hard...but maybe it's a skinny rope and a big needle? Nice try.

Four: Jesus is responding to the arrogance of the rich man, who claims to keep the law so well. The rich man is arrogant because he says so quickly, “Oh, I am really good at keeping the Law.” So Jesus is saying that rich people are often arrogant, and this is what keeps them out of the Kingdom. This one just doesn’t make sense to me: it’s just not there. Nice try.

All of these explanations try to soften Jesus’ words, rather than grasping the gist of them, which he ends with: “For mortals it **is** impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” To me the joke is that people have spent so much time explaining away the obvious meaning of the saying, making it quite possible and logical for the camel to go through the eye of the needle...and then totally disregarding the wonder and hope and possibility that we are being given: “For God all things are possible.” It seems that we would rather have safety and security than wonder.

This rich man is an unusual person, but in some ways he is standing in for all of us who are seekers. The rich man needs something and he knows it. The text says that he runs up to Jesus - a bit undignified for someone with class and status - and kneels before him. So much for arrogance. This is what people do in the Gospels when they need healing, not when they are just engaging in an intellectual debate. He seems to know that Jesus might have some healing advice for him, because he calls Jesus “Good Teacher.” But this good teacher immediately seems to reject the title, redirecting the man back to his roots: to God and God’s commandments. He lists the commandments that have to do with ethical treatment of one’s neighbors. And, somewhat slyly, it seems to me, he adds one more. To this rich man, he says, “Do not defraud.” That’s not on my list of the Ten Commandments, but maybe Jesus saw that it might be pertinent in this situation.

This rich seeker – what did he expect? Maybe he wanted some reassurance, some praise for being a decent, ethical man, and to hear that keeping the laws carefully would eventually pay off. But what we learn again and again in the Gospels is that you shouldn’t run up to Jesus as he walks to Jerusalem unless you expect to be challenged and pushed and changed. You might find more than what you were seeking for. In our day, we tend to think of seekers as the “unchurched,” and we may be tempted to think that we need to teach them how to live as faithful disciples of Jesus. But probably many seekers are already in our congregations. What if there are many people in our pews, and even among our church leaders, who sense that there is something “more,” and just doing what’s expected of them is not enough? What if, even within the church, we are still hungry for grace? What if church-going Christians still feel a deep need for transformation in their lives? What if we are all looking for God to do something “impossible”?

For centuries, many Christians have interpreted the crux of the matter, the object of the rich man’s request, as “going to heaven.” He runs up to Jesus and kneels before him to ask about eternal life, literally asking what good he must do to “inherit” life through the ages. It is quite common to think that the many times that eternal life is mentioned in the New Testament as referring to the afterlife, but it is only part of the story. Jesus spends more time talking about the Kingdom of God, an ever-present possibility. Jesus is offering something for the here and now.

He does not in any way condemn this man. In fact we hear the beautiful phrase, “Jesus, looking at him, loved him...” It seems to me that he sees through the riches, the confidence, the decency right down to the need and the hunger. He responds with love and he names it this way: “You lack one thing.” He hopes, with love, that this rich man will discover his true worth, independent of material possessions. He yearns for this man to experience a dependence on God’s

love independent of virtue, and to live in a community, or a kingdom, of others who have done the same.

If this is a healing story, this man is the only person in this Gospel who rejects healing. He cannot hear that the one thing he lacks is also the one thing he has to give up. This is a story of one possessed – by his need for his possessions. Seeker that he is, he does not want the freedom that is offered. He goes away, as it says, shocked and grieving.

Those of us with plenty of possessions – and I count myself among this group, having clothes and food and a warm house and the other comforts and opportunities that riches bring – listen to this story and begin to wonder. I have two theological questions. One: are we talking about a systems change (as the prophet Amos seems to do in his rant about the unjust rich people of Samaria) or is this a question of individual piety? We could imagine this passage as a message to the people of America to relinquish all the privileges that keep people poor, unsafe, unfed, and unheard. In that case, following Jesus means a steady commitment to changing the system, rather than a quick trip to the bank to write out an enormous check to our favorite charity.

Question two: Is there a way to hedge our bets, so that we have some treasure here, and some “in Heaven” as Jesus says? Can I stay secure and still enter that kingdom community of people with a radical trust in God? Somehow, I have to believe that even the small steps I take towards relinquishment of worldly “riches” mean something. The small amounts of time, talent, substance and influence (as our church covenant says) stand in for the larger generosity, the larger trust, the larger faith, to which I aspire. I think Jesus looks with love at those who can, for whatever reason, relinquish nothing. They are seekers too, just like those who are generous. There is always the hope that seeking will (maybe very slowly) turn to finding, that selfishness will turn to a passion for justice, that fear will turn to love. Perhaps, in the days that followed, the rich man re-thought his decision, just as we might re-think our own lives, and listen to that same call to come, follow Jesus. Will he (or we) respond with joy, or will he (or we) walk away again, grieving all the plans we’ve made for the perfect life?

The gifts we find in this community: the seeking heart, the reassuring divine word, the sharp, challenging prod of Scripture, the loving conversation of Jesus, the fellowship of our friends - are the many possessions which we are **not** asked to sell or relinquish. These are the treasures of the Kingdom of God, beside which our bank accounts begin to seem trivial.

And so, I ask, do we go away from reading this story hoping that it is a joke, some over-the-top hyperbole? That’s probably the simplest plan. Or do we turn away shocked and grieving, worrying about the camel and the needle, unable to follow because the price seems too high? Or do we stay instead and pursue the impossible possibility that God brings us? Do we let go and accept the riches of the Kingdom of God, knowing that they will bring us a deeper purpose, an eternal connection, a constant hope? This is a counter-cultural way of life, but one that the world desperately needs and seeks. We know we cannot offer this to each other or to our neighbors through our own efforts, our own virtue, our own riches. But thanks be to God: with God, all things are possible.