
“An Upside-Down Kingdom: Where the Last are First”

A SERMON on Mark 10:17-31 for the 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B
Preached 10 October 2021 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister
Cloverdale United Church, Surrey, British Columbia, Canada

At the congregation I pastored back in Connecticut, we had one of those street-side church signs with the changeable message board, much like the one we here at Cloverdale United out there along Highway 15. The practice during my most of time at that church was, unless we had a special event to advertise, that we put the upcoming sermon title out there each week. The sign was not only highly visible like ours, but because of its position right in the crook of the actual street corner at which the church property stood, *and* because of the often-changing traffic light at that busy intersection, a good many people actually read and digested whatever message we put on it—rather than simply zipping by it at too-fast-to-read speeds.

That church, as some of you will remember sits right next to the main campus of the University of Connecticut. One time, some years back, I and some of the other religious leaders serving the campus were at a meeting with some officials from the university. After the meeting, as we were all just sharing in some casual chit-chat with one another as we gathered our things, none other than the Dean of Students herself stopped me to say “I’m actually happy when I get stopped at the red light there on your corner ... because then I get a chance to actually read the sermon title you’ve put out there for the week.”

I happened to know that—unlike many in the world of secular, public academia—she was no stranger to the world of religion or of Christianity, more specifically. She was an active parishioner at the Roman Catholic parish down the street and somewhere along her journey, she’d actually spent some time in the Divinity School at the University of Chicago. So I asked her if by chance she’d seen the title for that coming Sunday’s sermon.

She had not.

<quote> “The Most Challenging Thing Jesus Ever Said,” I informed her.
“Forgive others?” she proposed in reply.

Now, indeed, extending forgiveness—*true* forgiveness—to others is a hard thing. It is, in fact, one of the harder practices of the Christian faith that any of us has the hope of growing into across our life journey.

Nevertheless, though, I am not convinced it is the *most* challenging thing Jesus said. After all, the practice of forgiveness is actually something we can live into and grow into. It is *possible*. And it is a possibility filled with promise, both for the one being forgiven and for the one called to forgive.

No, rather, I think we may very well just find that the most challenging thing Jesus ever said sits right here in these words we’ve heard in our reading from the gospel of Mark this morning.

After all, unlike the promise-filled possibility that we find in the practice of forgiveness, I suspect that not too many of us hear much promise in the words Jesus spoke in today’s passage. In fact, for most of us as middle-class North Americans, we might even feel a bit *pierced* by parts of today’s story.

Or at the very least, we’re more than a little uncomfortable with it.
And we should be.

In case you missed it, the basic gist of the story is this: a man comes to Jesus asking what

he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus says to him “you know the commandments,” and then rattles off a handful that probably sound familiar to us, taken from among the Ten Commandments. The man replies that he keeps all the commandments, and so Jesus tells him, ‘wait, you lack one thing: go and sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you’ll have treasure in heaven and you can come and follow me.’” The man then, we are told, goes away, grieving, “for he had many possessions.” After all of that, Jesus further muses to his disciples about how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, that it is “easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle” than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

Jesus’ words probably seem a bit harsh to us. Most of us don’t tend to like what Jesus says to the man who came to him with the question. We don’t like what Jesus has to say about wealth.

You know, most days I don’t think of myself as “rich”. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I am not a person living in poverty. But in our culture, most of us think “rich” means country club memberships, scenic-view properties in West Vancouver, private jets, or having both a Mercedes *and* Maserati in the garage. I assure you that the Chevy Volt outside did not cost as much as a Maserati, and while I enjoy the views from my apartment, it’s a 580-square-foot one that overlooks South Van and the airport, not Stanley Park and the Inlet. So, indeed, “rich” is not the first word that I would use to describe myself.

On the other hand, though, let’s be honest. I do have a job that pays a sufficient middle-class income, a roof over my head, food to eat, a car to drive, some fancy educational degrees hanging in my office. Back in 2009, when I first got an iPhone, one of the high school youth that was in the youth group I ran at the church I was serving at the time, he took great joy in calling me out as a “rich pastor” every time he saw me, for nearly 2 months.

And so, while I may not often think of myself as “rich”, at least by the standards that North Americans usually connect with that word, when you really sit down and compare what I have to a majority of the people on the face of this earth, then I do basically fall on the “rich” end of the spectrum.

And you know what: I don’t even have to know the details of your finances to be fairly sure that pretty much every one of you does, too. In fact, even at the official poverty line as defined by Statistics Canada, with their Market Basket Measure... a family here in Surrey at the poverty line is still in the wealthiest 15% of the world population.¹ More than 6.7 *billion* people in the world are poorer than that the people in the family at the poverty line here in Surrey. Now, “sure,” you may be thinking, “but this is Metro Vancouver, it’s an expensive place.” It’s true. So let’s go over to rural Manitoba or small-town Quebec, the places in Canada with the lowest poverty lines. At the poverty line in either of those places, and you’re still wealthier than almost 6-and-half billion people in the world, more than 80% of the world’s population.

“Easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle” than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God, eh? If we’re honest with ourselves and our relative “rich”-ness, especially in relationship to the whole world, it doesn’t seem that things bode very well for me or for you, with what Jesus says in today’s reading. And that’s why I think this passage may very well be the most challenging thing that Jesus ever said.

Now, perhaps you wonder if maybe there’s something that we’re missing here...? Truth be told, Christians have worked for centuries to find some way to soften this text, or get around it all together:

¹ Statistics Canada, “Market Basket Measure (MBM) thresholds for the reference family by Market Basket Measure region, component and base year”, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1110006601> . “How Rich Am I? Calculator”, *Giving What We Can* (website), <https://howrichami.givingwhatwecan.org/how-rich-am-i>

- For example, there was an ancient scribe who inserted words into Jesus' speech, so that it said "how hard it is *for those who trust in riches* to enter the kingdom of God", rather than just that it was hard for those who *had* riches. In other words, the problem is not *being* rich but *putting our faith* in wealth. Well, it sounds nice. But we have since figured out that those *were not*, in fact, the words Jesus said. And anyway, that one little change doesn't really fit with the overall thrust of what Jesus is saying in the whole story.
- Or here's another popular diversion tactic: remember that whole line about the camel fitting through the eye of a needle? Well, there was some interpreter in the 9th century who said that the "eye of the needle" was the name of some really small low gate in the walls of Jerusalem, and that a camel would have to be unloaded and stoop down in order to enter it. If that's what this was in reference to, then a "camel fitting through the eye of a needle" isn't something *impossible*, just something *inconvenient*, perhaps *difficult*, something that would take a bit of extra effort and unloading. Well... as it turns out, scholars today pretty much all agree that there was never any such low gate. For a "camel to fit through the eye of a needle" means just exactly what it says... a camel—the biggest animal known to the people Jesus was talking to—fitting through the hole in the top of a needle—probably smallest opening they would have known. In other words, *impossible*.
- Or then, there's yet another one: perhaps you've heard someone offer up that Jesus somehow knew, somehow all-knowingly perceived with his special Jesus-Spidey-Senses, that wealth was this particular man's special 'weak spot,' and so he zeroed in on it only to expose the man's distinctive shortcoming. In other words, we could safely assume that Jesus would not ask *us* to part with *our* possessions, if that wasn't *our* special weak spot. You know, maybe for us Jesus would zero in on our road rage, our Starbucks addiction, our Canucks fanaticism.²

The fact of the matter is, we so *desperately* want there to be *some* way that what Jesus is saying really means something else. And it's not just us—here, today, in a mostly middle-class congregation in North America. None of these tactics to explain it away are particularly new; many of them go back for centuries, some even a millennium or more.

Perhaps you are eagerly waiting for me now to come up with some new explanation, my own version of why we should go on with our lives and not be troubled by Jesus' words here. Perhaps you're waiting for me to say something that will make Jesus sound a little less demanding.

Well, you know, sometimes I think one of the problems we have as modern-day Christians—at least us middle-class Christians in places like Europe, Canada, and the United States—is that we have a tendency to make Christianity not demanding *enough*. Sometimes people are *hungry* for something with a little more substance... something worth giving themselves over to... something that actually *expects* something of them. We must remember that the scriptures told us that Jesus looked at this man and *loved* him. Not that Jesus thought the man was trying to test him. Nor that Jesus was trying to mock the man. But that Jesus *loved* him... and *out* of that love, instructed the man as he did.

² This list adapted largely from Matthew Skinner, "Commentary on Mark 10:17-31", *WorkingPreacher.org*, 11 October 2009, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=402.

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Well-known American preacher and Methodist bishop William Willimon tells the story of a night when once he was exploring this text at a Bible study with some students in a college dorm. He asked those students “what do you make of this story?”

“Had Jesus ever met this man before?” asked one of the students.

“Why do you ask?” Willimon responded.

“Because Jesus seems to have lots of faith *in him*. He demands something risky, radical of him. I wonder if Jesus knew this man had a gift for risky, radical response. In my experience, a professor only demands the best from [the] students that the professor thinks are the smartest, best students. I wonder what there was about this man that made Jesus have so much faith he could really be a disciple.”

“Wow. Didn't think about that,” Willimon remarks.

Then, he says, “another student said thoughtfully, ‘I wish Jesus would ask something like this of me. My parents totally control my life just because they are paying all my bills. And I complain about them calling the shots, but I am so tied to all this stuff I don't think I could ever break free. But maybe Jesus thinks otherwise.’”

Reflecting on that night, Willimon writes “Well, I was astounded. What I had heard as severe, demanding BAD news, these students heard as gracious, GOOD news. Jesus invites people to be his disciples: divest! Break free! Let go of your stuff! Follow me! *I believe you can do it!*

Such is the peril, *and the promise* of being met by Jesus!”³

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After Jesus made the camel-going-through-a-needle remark, the scripture tells us that the disciples “were greatly astounded, and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’” In their time, much like our own, wealth and material belongings were thought to be a sign of God's blessing on a person. If a person who is supposedly *blessed* cannot be saved, then who can be?

“Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it *is* impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’”

That, my friends, may be the even harder—the hardest, most challenging, in fact—truth in this story. “What can I *do* to inherit eternal life?” Nothing, it turns out. That's all up to God's grace. Nothing you do, nothing you achieve, nothing you possess gains you God's favour. God delights in your *being*, not your doing, your owning, your striving. God delights in *you*, not what you have or what you accomplish. Even as God calls us to join in the work God is up to in the world, at the end of the day whatever is achieved is a gift, a sheer gift flowing from God's grace.

And that, my friends, is more than enough to give thanks for, this day and every day!

BLESSING AND HONOUR, GLORY AND POWER BE UNTO GOD, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.

³ Taken from William Willimon's sermon “The Peril (and the Promise) of Being Met by Jesus”, for the radio show *Day1*, 11 October 2009.