

Sermon for 10/14/18

## THREADING THE NEEDLE

“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.” So declares Jesus, our Lord, as he reflects upon the chances of the rich man to achieve his dream, the attainment of eternal life.

These words always come as something of a painful shock. We know full well that they are addressed to us. Indeed, we are rich in possessions by any measure you choose. We have better than average homes in the better parts of this community. Our children are able to attend expensive schools of higher education, and even the young have little swooshes on their polo shirts. There are an exceptional number of nice cars in the parking lot today, and we vacation in exotic, far off places when the weather gets too chilly or too hot.

Americans enjoy one of the highest standards of living in the world, and we enjoy the up side of that standard. We are rich by any measure you choose. So when we hear these words of Jesus, we feel stung, pricked in our conscience, as if we are sitting on pins and needles. After all, here we are in church, trying our level best to be good Christians, following the rules of right conduct, and Jesus tells us we have about as much chance of getting into heaven as a camel does getting through the eye of a needle, just because we are well off. It doesn't seem fair.

Scripture records that the Disciples were amazed at Jesus' words; no, they were exceedingly astonished, out and out flabbergasted! The rabbis taught that prosperity was the blessing of the righteous and the sign of God's favor. Remember Job? He was a righteous man and as a result had great prosperity. But when God removed his possessions as a test of his faith, his friends declared that he was cursed by God for some misdeed. It was good to be a person of means, because it indicated that you were first in line to enter the kingdom of God. Besides, all that wealth allowed you more time to fulfill all the demands and ritual observances of the Temple, time which the poor did not have. So justifiably, the Disciples were incredulous at Jesus' words, and asked, “If not the rich, then who can be saved?”

We still regard wealth as a blessing. We respect those who are well off, even envy them a bit, especially if they earned it themselves rather than inherited it. We look to them for leadership, listen to what they have to say with a certain deference, and dream of having the good life as they do. Our primary goal in life is to make money, or at least to have a degree of financial security, of which you can never have enough. Years ago I did a values clarification exercise with a church youth fellowship. Their number one value? Money! Money was what they most wanted out of life, and they learned that from us. So here we sit, discomforted, wondering if we can thread the needle into the kingdom of God.

What really determines whether you enter the kingdom of God or not is what you want out of life. By itself, money has nothing to do with it. It's a matter of getting or giving. All of us want to get things out of life. We want money, a nice house, status, respect, a comfortable existence. We want to acquire the good things that life has to offer. The rich man in scripture had accomplished this. He had earned the good things that life has to offer by his industry and talents. No doubt he was respected in the community and acknowledged in the Temple as one blessed by God. And having gotten everything he wanted from this life, he began to look toward eternal life. He asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Tell me Jesus, how do I get that?”

In a manner which was apparently clear to the rich man, but is rather obscure to us, Jesus tells him that the only way to get eternal life is to give away everything he's got. You see, eternal life isn't something you can get like you get other things. Eternal life is given, not gotten, and it is given by God to those who give. The rich man was trying to earn his way into heaven, asking what he could do to inherit eternal life. He was self-interested. He wanted to get eternal life for himself.

It is indeed a paradox, and yet the very truth that sets us free, that giving is what gets us the most out of life. More than anything else, we want to be loved and accepted. But the harder we try to get love, the less we get. The more love we give, the more love we get. We want to live the good life, have love in our

hearts for all people, enjoy justice in all our relationships, live in peace with everyone the world over and be remembered as a good person. Jesus tells us that the only way to get this life is to give everything we've got.

This is why Jesus declared that it's difficult for the well-to-do to enter the kingdom of God. Because money always tempts us to get things, to buy what we need and purchase what we want. Wealth tempts us to be self-interested. We want the abundant life, but our material abundance is an enemy to the abundant life. So, the rich and well-to-do face the entrance to the kingdom of God as a camel faces the eye of a needle. It seems impossible to get through. Yet get through we must if we are to inherit eternal life. Thank God, there is a way. Yes, thank God, for what seems impossible to us, is possible for God.

What we must do to inherit eternal life, what we must do to become part of God's eternal life, is live a self-forgetful and unselfish life, is to give everything we've got, instead of trying to get everything we can. Now, not everyone needs to give up their money. "Go, and sell what you have, and give to the poor," was a prescription for a particular person with a specific need. Jesus was not declaring poverty as a requirement or an ideal for everyone. He was a good physician, and did not prescribe the same pill for every patient. But, everyone must give up the desire to procure goods for oneself to the exclusion of others. Everyone must give up the desire to get at the exclusion of giving. I think Sir Winston Churchill said it best: "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give."

The self-forgetful life is the life that is eternal. The self-forgetful life unites us with God's self-forgetful love and God is the Eternal. This is the agape life, life ruled by giving, life ruled by a love for God and others that takes no stock of itself, but pours out its life in generosity. The remarkable fact is that if we truly live a life of giving, we will not only enjoy the abundant life, but will also receive in abundance the goods of this life we desire and try to get. Jesus promises that we will receive a hundredfold in this life and in the next for our giving, for God loves a cheerful giver, and so does everyone else.

The power of God embraced through faith is what enables us to become givers. Faith in God's love gives us enough security to reach out to others with no heed for ourselves. It is our trust in God's saving love that changes the eye of a needle into a massive portal into the kingdom. But the way of faith and trust in God's redeeming love is chosen. The rich man chose his way, passing up the opportunity to walk side-by-side with the son of God and to be a part of the greatest drama in all history, because of his self-interested outlook on life. You and I have the same opportunity available to us, and the same choice to make.

Today, we begin our annual stewardship campaign to support the on-going, life-giving ministry we do with each other on behalf of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Stewards are those who use their gifts for God's ends, not their own. That is what stewardship is all about. Our wealth is a part of that, but so is everything else we have and everything we are. God invites us to be givers, like God is, of time, talent, and treasure.

"To whom much is given, of him is much required." So said Foster McGaw, founder of the American Hospital Supply Corporation, as he responded to the profound gratitude of the Presbyterian Foundation for his eight million dollar contribution to the future of the ministries of the Presbyterian Church. It was a miracle. A camel passed through the eye of a needle. Why? Because a man blessed with wealth saw it as an opportunity to give instead of get. Few of us have that kind of money to contribute, but we each have been blessed by God's grace and can give of that which we have in abundance. For the life of a disciple needs to get beyond the seeking of personal good until his or her life overflows into the lives of others. That is what God wills. That is how we thread the needle into the kingdom. So give of whatever you have in abundance. Give without thought of getting. Give without thought of yourself, and inherit the eternal life in the kingdom of God for which you were created.

**PRAYER:** Almighty and everlasting God, save us from the temptation to always get things for ourselves instead of giving to others. By the power of your love enable us to live self-forgetful lives that we might enjoy the wonder and peace of your kingdom in this life and in the life to come. We pray in the name of him who gave his all for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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Mark 10:17-31