

“Threading the Needle”
Pentecost 19b Proper 23
Mark 10:17-31

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In Jesus' Name.

Let me remind you where we have been with Jesus over the last few weeks that has brought us to this point. We saw him place a child in the midst of his disciples saying, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” In contrast to those words and those arms opened in welcome we heard John say, “We saw someone casting out demons in your name and we forbid him because he was not following us.” And we saw John fold his arms in forbidding mode.

Immediately after that some Pharisees came to test Jesus with a question about divorce. They approached Jesus like lawyers come to take a deposition. Indeed, they came to depose him. In contrast to them people brought children to Jesus to receive a blessing from him. The children came to welcome a blessing from Jesus. That brings us to today's gospel reading, “As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him.” Do you see how we go back and forth between children and adults? Jesus tells us to welcome and be like the children. He does not have to tell us not to be like the grown-ups we encounter.

Therefore, I'm already a bit suspicious of the gown-up in today's reading. “Good teacher,” the man addressed Jesus, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. It was an odd, even unheard of way for a Jewish person to address another. The title was reserved for God. So, perhaps with the title and by falling on his knees before him, this man was acknowledging what the demons and we already know. This is the Son of God. However, in Mark's gospel no human person makes that confession until the end. The confession of Jesus as Son of God is reserved for the lips of the Centurion who stood at the foot of the cross. I don't think we can say the man was confessing his faith in Jesus as anything more than a teacher, which is how the man addressed Jesus the second time.

There is another possibility. Perhaps refusing the title was part of maintaining the messianic secret that Pastor Costello told us about some weeks ago. In Mark chapter 1 Jesus “cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak because they knew him.” A few verses later he cured a man with leprosy. Jesus sternly warned him, “See that you say

nothing to anyone.” Those two are typical. This command to silence became Jesus’ refrain. He returned to it after almost every miraculous event. However, we do not have any such event in this gospel reading. The only miracle on the horizon of this text would be threading either the camel or the rich man through the eye of a needle. So this is not a case of the Messianic secret.

A theologian named David Watson has a suggestion I find convincing. He points out that in this culture “a public compliment... increased the reputation... of the recipient.... [T]o receive public praise was to become obligated to the person who offered the praise. An accolade is thus a kind of challenge to the recipient: return the favor, or show yourself to be dishonorable....”¹ So, it was a calculated compliment. That is not all that different from the way things work today. Praise is often an introduction to a request. A stock scene in situation comedies is when a son or daughter heaps praise on a parent. The parent responds, “How much do you want? You must want something.” This man was looking for an endorsement from Jesus, some word of confirmation. His compliment was calculated to gain a compliment in return.

In refusing the compliment Jesus sidestepped the obligation. Jesus was not there to trade high fives and empty compliments with the man. He seeks rather to be of real help to him who comes asking, “What must I do to be saved?” Jesus quoted the catechism to him. “You know the commandments. You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and mother.” The man said, “Teacher, I have kept all these from my youth. Jesus does not dispute the man’s claim.

Mark tells us Jesus looked upon the man and loved him. Jesus said to him, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor... then come, follow me.” Go, sell, give; then come and follow. Sounds like five things to me. The man did only the first. He went. He climbed back in his Porsch and drove away, grieving, because he had many possessions.

As the man left, Jesus turned to his disciples and said, “It is easier to thread a camel through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” That sets the disciples and us to work calculating how this applies, or, more likely, does not apply to us. Peter said, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” “We sold the boat,” is how Pastor Faulstich paraphrased Peter a few weeks back. We gave up everything. “You will receive your reward,” Jesus answered. Essentially Jesus told Peter, “In return for everything I’m giving you

¹ David F. Watson, “Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost,” *New Proclamation: Year B, 2009* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 234-7.

the church. That is where you have all these brothers, sister, mothers, and a heavenly Father. And from now on you will never feel totally at home in the world.” I doubt that is how Peter wanted to add things up.

We say, “This text does not apply to me because I’m not rich.” However, the vast majority of the world’s people do not see much difference between the rich man’s Porsche and our Honda Accord. Another calculation has it that Jesus said this to one particular man. That doesn’t mean he says it to all of us. There are some in monastic orders who hear these words directed to them and they engage in this radical practice on behalf of the rest of us.

Yet another calculation made by most of the commentaries is that Jesus’ words to this man are applicable to whatever we might make an idol. Luther provided us a shorthand method for identifying the idols we construct. He began the explanation to every commandment by saying, “We are to fear, love and trust in God so that...” Our god is whatever we fear the most at any given time. It is what we trust in to overcome that fear. Where do we hang our hearts? There is our god.

The man in the gospel account hung his heart on his money. He is most afraid of losing it. Others will hang their hearts on something else. The list is nearly endless. This is an appealing calculation. However, Jesus said where your treasure is there will your heart be also. So, according to Jesus, you have to follow the money.

These calculations are not adding up. But there is a final addition and that is the record of the early church. If they had all done this there would not have been people with homes large enough to host worship. They would all be poor. There would have been no funds to support Paul in his missionary journeys or for us to support pastors and teachers like Tomas Gulan in Slovakia and Romas Pukys in Lithuania. Paul would not have had anyone from whom to gather an offering for the famine-stricken church in Jerusalem. And we would not have had the money to plant 40 acres of corn in Forrest, IL for the Foods Resource Bank to fund sustainable agricultural projects for those in need.

I have spent a goodly amount of time this past week figuring out how this passage does not apply to you and especially not to me. I realized about Friday morning that I was exactly like the calculating man who interrupted Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem and the cross awaiting him

there. In my calculations I most resemble the man who asked, “Good teacher, what must I do to be saved?”

A sermon I read on this text made reference to Tony Campolo, the great evangelical activist. “[He] says that when he was a young man he read this story of Jesus and the rich man and heard Jesus clearly demand that the young man sell all that he had and give it to the poor. He said the story caused him real problems.

“Then Campolo went to seminary, studied higher criticism of scripture, and his professors told him that this story did not mean what he first thought. Jesus did not mean to say, ‘Go, sell all you have and give it to the poor, then come, follow me.’ Jesus meant to say, ‘You need to be willing to give away all you have to the poor.’ You don’t have to do it; you just need to be open to the possibility of doing it.

“‘Whew,’ said Tony to himself, ‘that’s good to know what Jesus really meant by this. That makes it all a lot easier.’

“It took Tony a long time as a disciple, and thinking more deeply and faithfully, to get back to his youthful dis-ease with the possibility that Jesus really meant to say exactly what he said!”²

Perhaps dis-ease is what Jesus intended. He meant to disturb us. He meant to make us uneasy with our calculations, our cocksureness, our certainties, and make us more humbly reliant on his grace, because finally, when we have been stripped bare of all our possessions, and we will be, his grace is all we have.

² William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* (Vol. 37, No. 4, Year B & C, October, November, December, 2009), 9-10.