

Holding Stuff Lightly

This morning's Gospel picks up where we left off last week, with Jesus explaining what prevents us from entering the kingdom of God. Our Lord and the disciples are about to hit the road when a young man comes running up, hurls himself at Jesus's feet, and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. After establishing that the man has faithfully kept God's commandments since childhood, Jesus tells him, "go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; Then come, follow me." Shocked, the man goes away grieving because he has "many possessions." Jesus ruefully observes, "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."

This isn't one of Jesus's more popular sayings. For one thing, it's confusing. No one in their right mind would want to pass a live, kicking camel through the eye of a needle. There's no conceivable reason even to try. Some Bible scholars have attempted to make sense of this absurd analogy by arguing that it has been mistranslated and Jesus really said "rope," not "camel." That's less illogical, but why would anyone want to thread a rope through a needle? Others have argued that Jesus didn't mean a sewing needle but, rather, a particular gateway into Jerusalem that was so narrow that pack animals had to be unloaded before they could pass through. That may be the "needle" Jesus meant, but it's probably irrelevant. Jesus's point is that it's really difficult for rich people to get into the kingdom of God, so let's focus on that.

Over the centuries, preachers have used Jesus's words about camels and needles to guilt-trip anyone who could scrape two nickels together except, of course, the wealthy aristocrats who institutionalized and funded the "Church with a capital C." Those powerful people got to skip priestly bullying so long as they donated generously and sided with the ecclesiastical hierarchy in political battles. Another exception that comes to mind are the modern "prosperity Gospel"

preachers who assure their listeners that earthly riches are proof of God's favor, so it's okay for them – the preachers as well as their congregations – to live in multimillion dollar McMansions and travel in limousines and private jets. Otherwise, my fellow clergy often insist that money is the root of all evil, so anyone who has too much of it must be headed straight to hell. With respect, I don't believe that this passage supports any of those ideas.

Jesus doesn't seem to see money or the people who have it as inherently evil. He says it's hard for the rich to enter the kingdom, but he doesn't say it's impossible and he doesn't condemn the rich for their wealth. He doesn't explain *why* it's so hard for them to enter the kingdom either, so we'll have to figure that out by considering the young man. He's not a bad guy by any means. He knows the Ten Commandments and is scrupulous about keeping them. His wealthy peers might say he's virtuous enough, especially if they're confident that his riches (and their own) are proof of God's favor. But the young man wants to do better still, and he's smart enough to come to Jesus for advice. There's something endearing about him; Mark tells us that Jesus looks at him and loves him enough to invite the young man to join his band of followers. The young man must have some sense of how precious that invitation is. But he turns Jesus down and walks away, grieving, because he can't bring himself to part with his possessions. And that, I believe, demonstrates why it can be so difficult for people who have a lot of expensive stuff to enter the kingdom of God.

Last week, Jesus told the disciples that only those who receive the kingdom like little children will ever be able to enter it. There are probably exceptions, but most small children don't give two hoots about the dollar value of the things they love. And, apart from that one best-loved doll or stuffed animal that goes everywhere with them, kids don't cling to their stuff. Their possessions regularly get broken, lost, outgrown, or given away. Adults, on the other hand,

frequently hang on for dear life to whatever they have, and that can be a problem. Let's imagine it this way. At the end of a long and busy day, you come home and realize that your front door key is buried in your pocket or purse. That's no big deal if your hands are empty but, if you have a bag of groceries in one arm, a briefcase or purse in that hand, your mail in the other hand, and your dry cleaning over your other arm, you won't be able to pull out your key and open the door unless you're willing to put something down. The harder you hang on to whatever you're holding, the longer it will be until you're finally able to get into your home. That may be why the rich have so much trouble entering the kingdom of God. It's not their wealth itself that's the problem. It's their relentless clinging to their wealth, even when the Son of God personally invites them to put their stuff down and come in, that keeps them standing outside the door.

Stuff can be easy to lose whether you deserve to or not. Job is a righteous man, but he still loses everything when the Adversary attacks him. Although Job wants to make his case, he doesn't need to because God already knows he's innocent. It's hard to understand why God would let Job suffer, but I don't believe that he and the Adversary are heartlessly gambling on Job. God isn't gambling, at any rate, because he knows Job can and will come shining through whatever the serpent dishes out. Perhaps God is showing the Adversary that human beings are more deserving of divine love than the creature thinks. Or perhaps he's warning the Adversary about what will happen to it if it persists in torturing his beloved children. Job, a blameless man who is brought low and raised up high, prefigures Jesus. The Son of Man will be brought far lower and raised far higher than Job, and the Adversary will suffer mightily when he does.

We need look no further than the events of the past few weeks to understand how easily our own stuff can be destroyed. Hurricanes Helene and Milton took hundreds of lives and reduced millions of dollars of property to rubble. Whole towns were washed away, homes and

businesses destroyed, luxury cars and boats left broken in parking lots like children's discarded toys. Stuff is inherently impermanent no matter how expensive it is. If letting go of our earthly stuff is the admission fee to enter the kingdom of God, dropping it is cheap at the price.

When Peter points out that he and the other disciples gave up all they had to follow Jesus, he may be hinting that they'd like a massive reward. Jesus promises it to them – everything they had will come back to them a hundredfold – but they'll have to wait for it, and so will we. Meanwhile, I don't believe Jesus wants us to prove our virtue by begging ourselves in the hope of getting bigger, better stuff in heaven. *Quid pro quo* is not a kingdom concept. I don't believe he wants us to be proud or ashamed of our stuff, either. He'd probably prefer that we didn't care all that much about it. Owning a lot of pricey stuff doesn't prove you're a saint or make you a sinner unless you let your stuff define your identity or focus too intently on amassing even more. Stuff is just something to use and share, nice to have but nothing to brag about or hoard, and certainly nothing that should prevent us from becoming the people our God wants us to be.

That rich young man's possessions weren't treasures; they were an anchor around his neck. He threw away the priceless opportunity to travel with the Son of God as a beloved friend because he wanted to hang on to stuff that has long since crumbled to worthless dust. Today, Jesus invites us to walk with him in love, which means we need to be ready to go. We never know when he will present us with an opportunity to enter the kingdom of God, and we don't want to be so loaded down with stuff that we can't fit through the door when he throws it open.

Lord Jesus, all good things come of you. We thank you for our many blessings, including the possessions that you so graciously bestow upon us. Teach us to hold our stuff lightly, valuing our friendship with you most of all, so that we can gladly share our stuff with others or set it aside and follow you whenever you call us. Amen.