

“Letting Go of the Camel”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

This poor young rich man had no clue as to what he was getting into. He came to Jesus full of hope that he would share with him how to “inherit eternal life,” and he felt that he stood on solid ground. The young man had kept the Law, and in those days, wealth was seen as a sign of God’s favor, but he wanted to be sure. He didn’t want to miss anything that might mess up his chances, so the young man sought out Jesus to find out the best way to live.

Who knows what he thought Jesus might say? Maybe he would reveal some secret ingredient to salvation, or perhaps Jesus would tell him, “You’re doing great. Just stay the course, and all will be well.” Yet what came out of Jesus’ mouth shocked him. Sell all you have. Give the money to the poor, and come follow me. That is definitely **not** what the young man had in mind when he came to see Jesus. It hadn’t occurred to him that he’d need to get rid of it all, to let go of what he’d worked so hard for. It was too much, the price was too high, so he left.

Then Jesus turned to his disciples, who **had** given up everything to follow him: their families and jobs; safety and predictability. Life with Jesus was wild. They were scrutinized constantly, criticized and threatened by powerful enemies. Being with Jesus involved risk. It meant waking up in the morning not really knowing what might happen next. And as we’ve seen these past several weeks during our journey through Mark, Jesus was tough on them sometimes.

He told them how very hard it would be for those with wealth to enter the Kingdom of God. To do so would be like threading a camel through the eye of a needle. Basically, it was hopeless. This scared the disciples. Remember that in their world wealth was a sign of God’s

favor, so if those people couldn't make it, how could anyone else? "Then who can be saved?" they cried. Jesus answered, "For God all things are possible." Grace is how you make it.

But if that's true, then why did the rich young man need to cut free from his flocks and herds and fields and shops? Why did he need to put up his house up for sale? Nothing he did or didn't do could earn him the grace that gives new and eternal life. But Jesus saw his heart and knew that the things of this world would hold the young man back. They would act as a stumbling block, a distraction. He owned many possessions, and possessions have a tendency to take possession over their owner.

Now that's not true for everyone. Some wealthy people handle it well. They don't let it get in God's way. In fact, some people share their wealth generously to help others and to spread the good news. But this young man had to choose, and we do, too. It might not be our money that's got to go, though we need to keep watch over how we use what God gives us. Instead, we need to look for what's in the way, and let it go. But that's not easy.

First, how can we know what in our lives stands in God's way? What holds us back from following Jesus? The young man had no clue. Even after Jesus told him, he couldn't see it, and we can be just as blind to the facts as he was. The path to wisdom starts by not doing what the rich young man did. Do not walk away from Jesus. Stay with him, even if you don't like what he has to say, especially if you don't like what he has to say.

Read the Bible. Hebrews teaches us that "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." That sounds very unpleasant, and sometimes it is, but the Bible is our ally in figuring out what's keeping us apart from God. When you pray

and feel uneasy, a little scared, then you may be picking up the scent of what causes you to stumble, and it's time to hunt that down and get rid of it.

Maybe someone was mean to you or treated you unfairly and hurt you, and you resent it and spend a lot of time thinking about how you can repay them in full. That's called vengeance, and it belongs to God. When we try to steal it, we walk away from Jesus, because why wouldn't we? If we can hijack God's power of judgment and wrath, and pretend to be God, then what's the point of following Jesus?

Or maybe you worry too much. I do, even though I know that worry is a lie. It gives us the sense of doing something when there's nothing that can be done. It causes delusions of readiness. If I obsess enough about what scares me, then whatever happens, I'm good to go. Worry wastes so much time and energy that could be devoted to Jesus instead. Sometimes, we worry so much that there is no time or energy left for Jesus. Just think of how much better life would be if we let go of even 10% our worry and sought out Jesus and his peace.

But even when we find the culprit, when we find the camel that we can't thread through the eye of the needle, how do we let go? How do we let go, so that we can fit into the Kingdom of God? "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." So pray recklessly.

Say to God what you wouldn't dare say to another living soul, without fear, because He already knows. "Before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account." God already knows. Like Santa Claus, "he sees you when you're sleeping and knows when you're awake," which always creeped me out a little bit, but on the bright side, you can't shock or surprise God, so you might as well talk to Him frankly. "Approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find

grace and help in time of need.” Jesus became Incarnate, suffered as we did, though without sin, so that he can sympathize with our weaknesses.

When we really talk with God – just as we are – God talks back. Maybe not with audible words or astonishing signs, but in ways we don’t expect and may not notice unless we’re careful. God talks to us in ways that bring comfort and teaches us how to speak. When we listen to God, we learn how to speak. That’s how infants learn to speak. They listen to their parents and grandparents and siblings. When we listen to God, we learn how to speak to those things deep inside us that hold us back from following Jesus.

What if we took our worries aside and gently said, “Worry, my old friend, I appreciate your efforts over all these years, but your services here are no longer required. My future, whatever it may be, is in the hands of God. Here’s your severance check. I hope you enjoy your retirement.”

What if we took that angry, hateful, vengeful part of our souls, and sat down for a chat that might go something like this. “You are an excellent pirate, my friend, but raiding God’s wrath and judgment for personal use causes trouble, and it solves nothing. So I’ve reassigned you. I know it’s a cargo vessel, maybe not quite as fun as the raiding corsair you’re used to, but you’ll be carrying love from place to place, which I think you’ll find more fulfilling and exciting.”

That may sound silly, even crazy, and maybe it is, but have you ever tried it? Isn’t it worth trying just about anything that might help us let go of whatever keeps us from following Jesus?

When I revisit this story for a sermon or a Bible study, I often wonder what happened to that rich young man. I wonder if he mulled over the radical challenge Jesus gave him. I hope

that he came to his senses, did what Jesus told him to do, and went back and followed him. But sadly, it's more likely that he went back to the daily grind, settled for an ordinary life, focused on getting more, because there could never be enough. There's no way to know.

But we can know the freedom of letting go of whatever it is that keeps us from following Jesus. We can know the joy and peace of being with him. We can know that the impossible melts in presence of the fire of God's powerful love. And that's plenty enough. Amen.