

A Sermon by the Reverend Elizabeth F. Keeler

The Twenty First Sunday after Pentecost



14 October 2018

Amos 5:6-7,10-15

Psalm 90:12-17

Hebrews 4:12-16

Mark 10:17-31

Perhaps you've heard some of the jokes inspired by this morning's Gospel. A New Yorker cartoon shows two people in conversation who are clearly of considerable means, the caption reads: "Well, we either need bigger needles or smaller camels."

There's also the sweet story of a child who is coming into some awareness about what she's hearing in church and so, on the Sunday night after this Gospel, she can't sleep for thinking about it. The little girl finally jumps out of bed, runs down the hall to her parents' room, and wakes them up whispering urgently: "Mommy, Daddy, Jesus says that rich people don't go to heaven!" To which her father sleepily responds: "We're not rich. Go back to bed!"

The reason we love to tell jokes about this passage, of course, is because it's so challenging and humor helps break the tension. But the reality is that today's Gospel is rife with tensions and challenges and extremes. As one commentary notes: "Extreme demands (sell everything you own and follow Jesus); extreme judgment (it's nearly impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God); and extreme promises (with God all things actually are possible).

The biggest tension in today's Gospel, however, is that Jesus seems to contradict himself. In one breath He gives precise instruction about what is required to inherit the kingdom; absolute clarity on what it takes to be an authentic follower: sell all that you have, wealth is an obstacle. And then in the next breath Jesus answers the question about who can be truly saved by stating: For mortals it is impossible but for God all things are possible. So, which is it? Can I be an active participant in my salvation or not? If I can, tell me exactly, please, what I must do to qualify. Or, if salvation really is all God's doing, clarity on that would be helpful as well.

In a real sense this Gospel is a microcosm of the works *versus* grace tension – can we do anything to earn salvation or, in the end, is eternal life a complete gift of God's grace? The rich man who lived a moral life desperately wants to DO something: "Teacher" he asks Jesus, "what must I *do* to inherit eternal life?" And despite the fact that he has always followed the commandments of God, the final cost is too high for him – as it is for most of us. When the disciples make the point that they should be a shoo-in for entrance into the Kingdom because they have done exactly what Jesus advises the rich man to do (they *really did* sell

everything to follow him) Jesus says wait a minute – not quite so fast! Indeed, it looks as if Jesus is playing both sides of the works *versus* grace debate. And that, my friends, is exactly the point of today’s Gospel - the tension is the lesson.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer offers an honest way to think about the tension between works and grace when he talks about “costly grace – costly grace.” What Bonhoeffer suggests is that salvation is never cheap. Not for the poor and not for the rich. Salvation always comes at a cost, which Jesus paid in full and paid forward for us. Yet even so we are called to participate actively and faithfully in our salvation. And so, this morning we, who have so many blessings, are called to pay particular attention to Jesus’ sharp challenge to the wealthy man - all the while accepting the fact that we are completely dependent upon God if our lives are to have any meaning whatsoever. We live in this tension and our work today is to explore what that means.

Here is one way into the challenge: it’s not our possessions *per se* that separate us from God – it is our attitude toward them. Put simply, possessions, all the things we fill our lives with, often keep us from realizing that we desperately need God in our lives. As we accumulate riches, we are tempted to trust in our possessions and our powers of acquiring them for comfort and security. Wealth honestly and ethically acquired, even generously shared, can lead to pride and an over developed sense of self-reliance.

This is why Jesus’ challenge to the wealthy man is so drastic – the man’s orientation is that *he* is still in control – “what can I do” he asks Jesus. The man believes that because he is rich and has been good, eternal life must be within *his own* ability to acquire it. After all he’s been able to acquire so much. Jesus reveals that the only way the man’s understanding can be reoriented is by radically stripping him of all that he owns. Only then can he appreciate that what matters most is actually impossible to acquire – only God can gift it.

Today’s Gospel also suggests that poverty puts one closer to the Kingdom and that, dear friends, is probably true for the simple reason that *with less* there is that much *less* separating us from acknowledging our utter dependence upon God. But is there a cost for entering the kingdom of God if you’re poor? Of course, there is, life is surely a constant struggle. One may want for shelter, or food, or medical care and very likely living on the margins of society. Make no mistake, being hungry is never desirable, but having deep hunger for God - is.

Now, is there a cost for entering the Kingdom if you’re wealthy? You bet there is. One has the constant and vigilant responsibility of remembering to *whom much has been given, much is expected*. Not simply in our doing but in the way that we are – living humbly and in what we offer to give up - in how we treat one another and those less fortunate. Brothers and sisters, we must always remember that our attitudes toward wealth and possessions truly can become genuine hurdles to the Kingdom of God.

If the tension around works *versus* grace is the takeaway from today’s Gospel, well then Jesus also offers us great comfort in our struggle. Notice that right before Jesus tells the wealthy man the one thing he lacks

and instructs him to go sell everything – Jesus looks at him and loves him. And in just the same way, Jesus looks at us, and loves us even as we struggle to make meaning of this life and the life to come. Amen.



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