

October 18, 2009
Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

“Who Is Rich?”

Text: Mark 10:23-31

Exactly what is rich? You hear the term thrown around a lot in politics when it comes to taxes. This past presidential election I remember there was talk of one candidate refusing to raise taxes on households earning less than \$250,000, but in another speech it was \$200,000 and in another it was \$150,000. And this made folks wonder, “OK. So how much money equals being rich?”

That question really hits us hard in today’s Gospel lesson. This reading falls right on the heels of last weeks reading when the wealthy young man walks away in despair because Jesus told him to give all his wealth to the poor and follow the Christ. Jesus says, “*Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.*”

We, like the disciples, are exceedingly astonished at this saying. Prosperity is something we spend our lives working for. The idea that our wealth could somehow keep us from the kingdom of God is frightening. But Jesus says what He says and we can’t get around it, “*How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!*”

So we pause and calculate. Exactly what is rich here? How much wealth equals the amount of wealth Jesus is talking about? If we’re honest with ourselves, most if not all of us will look around our life and be able to find material blessings and wealth to some extent or another. We are in a country with one of the highest standards of living in the world. No matter how we live, you’ve got to believe that there are millions of folks in Africa, Central and South America and elsewhere who would look at what we have and consider us wealthy.

The disciples probably feel the same way we do. This seems like a totally losing proposition. It’s no wonder they ask, “Then who can be saved?”

I think what Jesus is talking about is kind of like trying to clean my house on my day off with a TV turned on. I have one TV with basic bare-bones cable. I get maybe 25 channels. But if the TV is on when I’m trying to do the house cleaning I will eventually pick up that remote, surf through the channels and find something that catches my eye and I’ll lose focus, sit down and start watching.

A wealthier person is at greater risk. I mean, they’ve got more than one TV. The chance for distraction is bigger. A really wealthy person may have a TV in every room. And they probably have expanded cable along with premium channels like HBO and Showtime; maybe even a really big DVD collection! The potential for distraction by the boob tube is huge!

I believe Jesus is saying that having wealth equals having a potential for distraction from faith in God. It is dangerous.

For one, wealth gives us the opportunity to buy all sorts of toys to divert us from thinking about love of God and neighbor. Toys aren’t bad, but they can become an obsession which pushes more important things out of the picture.

Wealth also can give us a feeling of security in and of ourselves. Like the parable of the guy who wanted bigger and bigger barns to store his wealth, the more riches we have the more likely we are to put our trust in those riches to take care of us. We all too easily seem to be able to forget that this life isn’t all there is and that those riches don’t do squat for us in the next life.

Probably worst of all, great wealth can make us feel special. This was the thinking in the time of Christ. Those with riches thought that they were blessed by God because they were so righteous and upright, and such thinking is not just in history. We easily slide into the thinking that we really deserve what we have because we've worked so hard or are just that good at our job or even because we're so upright that God thinks we deserve more than the next guy. We can forget that our work and the rewards that go with it are a blessing from God. And then instead of looking at those who are less blessed with love and compassion, we view them as inferior and less deserving; sometimes even with contempt.

So does this mean the rich can't get into heaven? Yes. That's exactly what it means. We are sinful. In our sin we are always going to be looking to be distracted away from God's kingdom. The very wealthy, those with cable TVs in every room, maybe they are at greater risk because of the added temptation of great material wealth. But guess what, even the person with the 13" black and white antenna TV is going to give in to that temptation. And everybody in this analogy has a TV. We are hardwired for sinfulness regardless of our wealth simply because whether we actually attain them or not, we all pursue the worldly rather than the heavenly. On some level the disciples realize this and are astonished and ask, "*Then who can be saved?*"

Jesus answers with the Gospel truth, "*With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.*"

This is pretty much law and Gospel in a nutshell. Who can be saved? Nobody; at least not by anything of themselves, and certainly not by their accumulated wealth or even by the absence of such riches. We cannot do enough, we cannot give enough, we cannot sacrifice enough to pay for our constant rebellion and sin against our creator. It is impossible. For each one of us it is as impossible as that camel fitting through the eye of a needle.

But with God the impossible is made possible. God is so far above us in grace and mercy that He does what we cannot and certainly what we would not. We sometimes wince and whine about parting with a few dollars to help someone else out of difficulty. Jesus Christ gave up the glory of God to become one with His broken human creation in order to save it. For us the idea of actually suffering physical pain for somebody, especially somebody who has wronged us, is incomprehensible. Jesus Christ came to earth with the express purpose of suffering unto death to pay the blood price to purchase us back into the kingdom of God.

This talk of rich people getting into heaven being like camels doing the impossible thread of a needle disturbs us. It scares us. It makes us look at ourselves and ask, "What exactly is meant by being rich?" We worry that we qualify, and thus are facing the impossible when it comes to entering the kingdom of God.

This is exactly how it is, but not because we are rich, but because we are poor. We have nothing to hold up as righteous before God. We are indeed poor, miserable sinners with no chance at glory.

But in our wretched sinful state we turn to God and see His riches. God is rich in mercy. God is rich in grace. God is rich in love beyond measure. God is rich in righteousness which He pours out for us in the blood of Himself, His Son, to receive simply by turning to Him in the faith to which He even calls us through His spirit. This is the treasure above all earthly riches; the perfection of God made available to His oh so imperfect children through Christ Jesus.

Who is rich? God is rich, in all manner of eternally good things for us. Follow this treasure no matter what it may cost you. There is no fortune of this world that compares with the wealth available to us in Christ Jesus.