

They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?”

It delights me no end that today, my last Sunday with you as your every-Sunday priest, I am riding a certain proverbial camel in the direction of an equally proverbial needle and remembering all the people I’ve teased about being rich.

As every parish I’ve served in has been a rich parish, it will come as no surprise that the camel and the needle are about as popular in my world as that great Pauline teaching “wives obey your husbands,” which the church at least had the courtesy to delete. And so it is with the camel. No one likes thinking they could possibly be bad.

Back in the 1960’s, I remember the Reverend Browne Barr reassuring the First Congregational Church of Berkeley that this saying had nothing to do with the needles used in sewing: it referred to an actual, narrow gate in Jerusalem that was called the Eye of the Needle, and that a camel could indeed squeeze through it if it was a slender camel and not too heavily packed. You could feel the sigh of relief among the stalwart and virtuous middle-class souls in the pews. Except that this gate never existed. It was a Medieval invention urging people to lay down the baggage of their sins so that they might enter through the narrow gate to salvation. Somehow wealth became equated with sin, and yet one more curtain of guilt descended gently from above, like a fog obscuring our vision.

Fortunately, as my rich friends were quick to point out, if it was hard to enter the kingdom of God, it was not impossible, for did not Jesus say, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

With God all things are possible. That means I can be saved after all. Even if I am rich.

Once we realize that with God all things are possible, we can relax.

Unless you happen to be Clint Schnekloth, pastor at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Fayetteville, Arkansas. In this week's "Preparing for Sunday" essay in *The Christian Century*, he tells me to stop making excuses and tell it like it is, reminding me that "The richest 10 percent are responsible for over 40 percent of all global emissions, and the wealthiest 1 percent contributes more than twice as much carbon dioxide as the poorer half." He doesn't stop with that. "The rich are destroying our planet, and their ideologies, which through political and economic influence become the world's ideologies, shape the Dithering, Kim Stanley Robinson's word for the policy makers who do little to nothing to stop what's happening."

As a defender of nature, I thrill to his statistics and accusations, but, when, as today, the camel and the needle are paired with a reading from the Book of Job, I find I must pause. Suddenly, I'm hearing, not a reasonable critique of the wealthy, but one of the rationalizations offered by Job's so-called friends seeking to unearth hidden faults as the reason why Job was suffering. Right before this morning's passage, Eliphaz has been leading Job, who was rich, through a wholesale condemnation of the damage caused by the rich, "For you take pawn from your brother for naught and strip the naked of their clothes/ No water do you give to the famished, and from the hungry you hold back bread/ And the strong-armed possess the land, the privileged dwell upon it..." (22: 6-8) And returning to *The Christian Century* article I read, "No single event would have a greater impact on climate change than a wholesale awakening of the rich to their own complicity." Whew! Let's blame those guys out there.

Remember when I suggested to you last week that when Francis of Assisi gave up all his worldly bling and went into the forest, he became not the little poor one but the mega rich one? The fact that neither he nor the culture around him could appreciate the living wealth of the natural world but were already turning their sights to nature as a locus of colonization and

extraction is humbling to contemplate. The kingdom of the Economy prevented them from seeing the kingdom of God which is far clearer in the reciprocal world of nature than in the competitive natures of cities. I know that feeling. It's really easy to get lost in all my stuff and forget that it's ultimately meaningless.

Let's go back to the gospel. "As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'"

He doesn't ask how to find eternal life; he asks how to inherit it. By calling eternal life an inheritance, he knows, if unconsciously, that something or someone must die so that he can live, but he can't see beyond that. The lives of the rich are shaped and enriched by inheritance.

It's an interesting question, this idea of inheritance, but since Jesus doesn't answer it, neither do we have to answer it, at least for today. Instead Jesus asks, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Christians might argue that since Jesus is one with God, of course he is good, but this is probably not the point. To call someone good when petitioning them was a way of expecting a good response. The man is asking Jesus for a positive answer to his query about eternal life.

Instead, Jesus says, "You know the commandments."

Indeed he does. "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."

And then Jesus turns it all on its head. Jesus loves this man. It's the only time in all Mark's gospel that Jesus overtly loves someone. The moment Jesus looks at the man and loves him, it's easy to connect it with Jesus' at the Last Supper¹ and we remember that Jesus is not setting out on just any journey. He is going to Jerusalem, where he will suffer and die.

The meaning is: You cannot inherit eternal life until you let go of this one.

¹ John 13:1 Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

The man has many possessions. (And remember that possession has more than one meaning and that Jesus, especially in Mark's gospel, heals a great many people who have been possessed.) Jesus uses the language of money to describe the spiritual nature of attachment. "Sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven..."

For all that we equate money with "the real world," money itself is entirely symbolic. The Economy in which we put so much of our trust and aspiration, far from being the most real thing about us is in fact the most unreal. A dandelion has more real existence than a dollar. Money is a medium of exchange and has no more and no less value than what we assign to it. Being the product of human hands, human imagination, and the endless human search for shortcuts, money is also idolatrous, and to value a person for their net worth is not to value them as God values them. But in mass standardized societies, money is one of the few things that can be used as an objective measure of worth, so it's an obvious move to believe that the person with more money is more blessed than the one with less, no matter what the Beatitudes say. And this was just as true in Biblical times. Abraham was blessed with riches. So were David and Solomon. So were many others. So was Job.

And when Jesus announces that "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," his disciples are astounded and ask, "Then who can be saved?"

At that moment, they are admitting that they, too, are rich.

So Peter jumps in and says, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Peter is not being his often-clueless self here. He doesn't talk about selling. He speaks of leaving. Leaving his insular world and entering a much bigger one. Following Jesus from an environment

full of fears and constraints into the kingdom of God, “where many who are now first will be last and many who are now last will be first.”

Were we to keep reading the story, here’s what we would next encounter: “Jesus and his disciples were now on the road to Jerusalem. Jesus was going ahead of his disciples who were filled with alarm; the people who followed behind were afraid.”

The story of Job is like reading Jesus’ whole answer to the rich man. The story of Job is the story of a rich man who enters the kingdom of God. It’s a difficult, but ultimately rewarding path. Like all wisdom stories, Job’s story lays it on thick. The way to eternal life is the ability not to turn away from suffering. Suffering is as much a part of life as joy. Job is a scary story. It is also a magnificent encounter with God.

“Then who can be saved?” asks Peter.

“For God all things are possible,” answers Jesus.

Thanks to all of you, for showing me what is possible. Amen.