

*Lord, open our ears to hear your Word spoken to us; Open our hearts to be changed by Your Spirit. Amen.*

Show of hands – does this week’s gospel sound like Good News to you?

Do we want to hear Jesus say, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God’s realm?”

Now, lest we get side-tracked on camels, I’m told the word for camel and the word for rope are similar; Jesus may have been talking about fitting a thick rope through a small needle – equally impossible, but not quite as odd an image.

But that’s not the troubling part, is it? It’s the “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”

We make such a big deal about being inclusive – could it be that we are excluded?

There are a few ways we can respond to this message –

We can say, “Well, we’re not really wealthy. This is meant for really rich people.”

But the poorest American is wealthier than 85 percent of the world’s people...

We can say, “This has to be adjusted for inflation. We can’t take it literally.”

We can say, “Oh, he must have meant spiritual wealth.

Let’s not talk about money in church.”

I’m pretty sure he was talking about us and our money.

If we were to not talk about money in church, we’d have to cut out a lot of what Jesus talked about – 11 of 39 parables reference finance, and he talked a lot about giving away our wealth, sharing our wealth.

But give it all away? See our wealth as keeping us from the life of God?

The disciples who were stunned when Jesus said,

“It is so hard for people with wealth to enter the Kingdom of God.”

They were shocked, because in that time – as in much of America today – wealth and possessions were seen as a sign of God’s blessing.

If the wealthy have trouble entering the Kingdom of God, who can be saved?

And Jesus responds by reminding them that salvation is not ours to secure –

It is God’s to give.

In God all things are possible – so even the wealthy can be saved. And the poor.

When Jesus says, “It is so hard for people with wealth to enter the Kingdom

of heaven,” he isn’t being judgmental or punitive – he is simply observing a reality.

He doesn't say God values the rich more than the poor, or the poor more than the rich. Jesus wants to remove the obstacles between us and God. Jesus is not saying the gates are barred – he's saying we lay down our own obstacles.

When we have wealth and possessions, like this man in the story,  
we have to work hard to buy it,  
we have to protect it from theft and economic fluctuation,  
we have to find space to store our stuff, occasionally we have to show it off.  
So we work long hours, we get stressed out, we live in anxiety and competition.  
These possessions of ours don't just serve us – they become our masters.  
Who has time for a spiritual life? Who has space for a relationship with God?  
It's this treadmill that Jesus is inviting this man – and us – to step off.

Jesus is offering to set this man free – the same offer he makes to us, all the time. This man was so close... so close! Maybe Jesus asked such a radical thing of him because he was already so close. "Just take the next step," Jesus says in love. "Walk away from all that bondage, and come, walk with me. "Walk away from all that religion and enter into relationship with God through me. "Not an hour a week, or when you remember to pray – walk with me all the time."

Why is it so hard to say yes? Because I haven't, not fully. I'm on the slow track. Wealth can be an obstacle for us because it invite us to put our security in it. I certainly feel better envisioning a retirement with a generous pension than not having a clue how I'm going to take care of myself. But right there I have transferred my trust from the God who provides – but not always on our schedule – to security I can see and count.

*"How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God."*  
Not because the wealthy are bad or greedy –  
because sometimes we can't see where we're going.  
When we don't see that by sharing our wealth we could ease life for someone with less, we are turned away from God.  
As we release our grip on it we are better able to see the people around us instead of the wealth we value.  
Maybe we become able to value the people around us more than the wealth.  
Maybe we become less able to tolerate seeing someone else begging,  
or children in other countries dying for the lack of \$2 worth of food a day,  
or women dying in childbirth for the lack of medical care and clean water.

As we focus less on our own stuff, our wealth, our family, our security,  
we may start to see people around us as connected to us.  
As we release our grip, we might have to let more of the world's pain in –  
and be moved to participate with God in alleviating that pain where we can.  
It's one of those things where, the more we do it, the easier it becomes.  
I didn't know if I could send \$1,000 a year to support a child orphaned by AIDS in  
Kenya, on top of a 10% pledge to church, but I started in 2006, and I'm still fine.  
One young American woman spent time with those children in Kenya,  
and when she got back she talked about how much joy she saw,  
and then said, "I also learned that I have a lot of stuff. I can share more."

We can share more. We can give more.

I recently spent a week at a clergy wellness conference, and had to craft a  
"rule of life," a set of intentions/commitments to guide me.  
The fifth component of mine is to "spend my wealth so that others can thrive."  
I was inspired by hearing one of our faculty talk about buying coffee at Starbucks  
despite the price – because he's built relationships with the people who work  
there, and because Starbucks takes reasonably good care of its employees.  
I usually always seek the lowest price – but now I'm inspired to factor in  
employment practices, environmental impact, quality. I'm finally buying organic  
chicken and tipping more, and when I gave to two organizations working with  
hurricane victims I was surprised to find myself giving more than I usually do.  
And I will continue to pledge 10 percent of my income to the two Christ Churches.  
I pledge after taxes – 10 percent of what comes in generally goes out,  
sometimes more. It gets easier the more you do it.

I hope you will join me - estimate how much you think we can give to  
support what God is doing through us at Christ Church in 2025.  
I hope you will give at a level that you notice, but that doesn't scare you.  
This church very much needs to get out of deficit, but that's not why we give.  
We give because God wants us to be free, to release our grip and trust in God.  
Jesus didn't shake a finger at this man and say, "Give it all away and follow me!"  
He looked at him with love. That's where it starts. Jesus is looking at us with love.

This God who desires to spend eternity with us will draw us in as we allow  
ourselves to be tethered. We are the camels in this scenario!  
And oh, the blessings that flow to us when our hands are empty to receive them!  
*Amen.*

**Mark 10:17-31**

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?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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." They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age--houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions--and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

**Amos 5:7,10-15**

Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground!  
They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth. Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain,  
you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them;  
you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine.  
For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins--  
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.  
Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time.  
Seek good and not evil, that you may live;  
and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said.  
Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate;  
it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.