

Michael Lucas Sermon, October 13, 2024, St. Benedict Episcopal Church

How About a Smaller Camel?

Last century I had the privilege of growing up surrounded by four generations of my mother's family. My great grandmother lived with my grandparents across the street from our house. I still have a vivid memory of my great grandmother Zura, short for her full name Missouri, seated in a bentwood rocker, attired in her Church of the Brethren black dress, talking to her pet parakeets.

I spent many summer weeks in the 1960's with my mother's father on a Christmas Tree farm he had on twenty acres in a fold in the Appalachian mountains called Brother's Valley, a three-hour drive from our homes in the suburbs of Pittsburgh. Grandpa's cabin was one he built amid maple and hickory trees, adjacent to a three hundred farm that included a massive 1800's red wooden barn referred to by the family as 'Uncle Bruce's barn'. Grandpa had a well fed from a natural spring about 100 feet from the cabin; my morning chore was to prime and get the pump working and bring two pails of fresh water to the cabin. About 100 feet away in the other direction was the outhouse- a bit intimidating to use at night considering the bears in the area. Next to the grass path he made for cars to drive in was a small cache of coal used for the stove in the kitchen and the pot belly stove that warmed the whole cabin. When I was older my task was to use his riding mower to cut the grass very low for those who would come in late fall to get their Christmas Trees and shovel the needed coal to keep us fed and warm.

My grandfather had a certain resemblance to and even attitude of a then famous actor Walter Brennan, and more so to Brennan's character on the then popular television series *The Real McCoys*. Grandpa wore overalls, smoked a meerschaum pipe, a kind that changed color with age, and drove a small Mercury Comet station wagon that had a third seat *that looked backwards*. In his one car garage at his Pittsburgh home was a small work bench- he used strips of rubber cut from tire inner tubes of that era to bind wooden boxes filled with various tools and nails.

In terms of career, he was what we would call today a failed carpenter, having left the family farm to go to the big city. He laid it all on the line, but life became hard for his young family of seven, especially during the depression with little or no work. Later, I would learn that move from Brother's Valley may have been in response to his first wife and a young daughter succumbing to the Spanish flu epidemic of that era. Later, I would learn his return to his roots with the Christmas Tree farm was financed by an insurance policy the government provided his son, killed in action in World War Two, just before Christmas 1943. Our son, John Austin, is named for his son.

In retrospect, Job's lament "Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning..." may have been in Grandpa's heart, but never came from his lips. He

was there with us at church every Sunday, singing. I inherited many of his Scottish genes on frugality, but also, unfortunately, his inability to carry a hymn tune [sorry, Paul]. By today's standards of wealth, he had little, but he did not speak of family losses or lack of treasure. The love, not without occasional controversy, that surrounded us was real. **His wealth was elsewhere.**

On my father's side I am the grandson and great grandson of immigrants to America from Slovakia and Croatia. I am the first to have a college degree. In four generations, my family transitioned from agrarian to industrial to management to my having a profession as an architect and becoming a tenured and published academic. **When I read Jesus speaking to the 'rich man' I wonder if he's speaking to me.**

Mark quotes Jesus, "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." "Whoa", as *my* grandson Rune would say in a very flat voice. I jump to thinking, can I get a smaller camel? Can I get some clarity on what the line of being 'rich' is? Can I fit under the threshold of 'rich'? This week the Wall Street Journal suggested the 14% of American families that make over \$200k a year are 'rich'. Ok, as a retiree I'm good with that- so maybe the camel is now a donkey- good enough for Jesus into Jerusalem and blessed Mary to ride into Bethlehem, but still too big. What about taxes, our church pledge, and other benevolences - easily over a third of our income? Ok, maybe I'm now a shoulder banded snail size, but still doesn't fit. Maybe something is in that parable of a mustard seed? **Ok- even if a mustard seed- still won't fit.**

Mark quotes Jesus "...sell what you own and give the money to the poor...." Does he really mean *all* of it? In Luke 18 the diminutive, despised tax collector Zacchaeus who climbs a tree to engage Jesus is blessed with a visit by Jesus to his home, and he offers *half* of what he owns. Jesus tells him "Today salvation has come to this house". Is *half* then enough? Most commentators suggest Jesus is using hyperbole, meaning exaggeration for emphasis.

What does wealth mean? Does it represent a mastery of the conventions of the world with one's time and energy? Does it emerge from privilege, taken for granted, unseen? Is it a distraction that leads to a poverty of spiritual life within economic contentment? Satiation with our earthly and now digital culture is our love of the house of cards that is stacked from the economic wealth by this world. Fueled by comfort and wealth, our judgment into the human condition of our neighbors is blurred, and realities become hidden. I wrestle with this myself.

Our verse from Hebrews says "...we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are..."; perhaps this is pointing to Mathew 4 the desert, when the kingdoms and splendor of the world are offered to Jesus by Satan. Jesus tells him: "Worship the Lord your God and serve God only". **Is our wealth a blessing from God or a test about the allure of the world?**

Jesus preached to the world of the Sadducees and Pharisees. Sadducees often acquired a great deal of wealth and held prominent positions in society. Pharisees, as strict rule-followers, believed themselves to be more holy than the rest. **Jesus addresses both groups as he shows them how riches, earthly power, and good deeds don't merit a spot in heaven.**

Wealth as a sign of God's favor resting on the individual was a common opinion in the Jewish community across many generations. Biblical prophets had spoken against this understanding, warning the people that God was angry with them for their honoring wealth like an idol. **The ruling class rejected these divine warnings because they had taken comfort in the errant belief that their wealth insulated them from the futures the prophets were given to see.**

Ideas of wealth and God's favor continue through the Protestant work ethic and remain very much *American* today. Following the prophets, three late 20th century theologians rephrase the challenge. Henri Nouwen says: "Jesus came to announce to us that an identity based on success, popularity and power is a false identity." Jake Owensby tells us "...even if we make no conscious decision on the matter, our habitual actions, the patterns of our lives reveal what god we are worshiping and to what we are entrusting our very being. When Jesus says, 'follow me', he's offering us a different path. A radically different way of living. On this path, our sense of self-worth is received as gift, not achieved.". Walter Bruggeman in his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, one Sandy and I are reading with our sermon teaching cohort, gets closer to the core problem of the church dealing with wealth: "The task of the prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness of and perception of the dominant culture around us." Bruggeman noted this counter-narrative must take on the lures of consumerism, militarism, and nationalism, what our former Rector Caro+ termed the sin matrix. **We are to be in the world, but not of the world. We are to critique, but also offer.**

Part of that counter-narrative offer is the good news in the smallest part of our Gospel verse. Listen to how Mark tells us of *how* Jesus' delivers the message to the inquisitor: "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.'" He **loved** him- one of the few passages in the Bible where this kind of bond is explicitly written that way. **React with love, not judgment.**

Then we are gifted with yet another revelation of the offer when Jesus says: "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God". Mark tells us the rich man turned away from Jesus, but if we don't turn away, we find we are not alone in our struggle with wealth. As our Hebrews reading says, "The word of God is living and active..."; God sees into our hearts and celebrates our diversity of paths toward God. We know it is impossible to work our way to heaven on our own merits. Works or abundant wealth shared- neither matter. We are saved by grace and God's love alone. **We are loved, not only historically across generations; we are loved endlessly, now.**

We can compound this gifting of spiritual wealth in the counter narrative we offer. Second Peter tells us “God made great and marvelous promises, so God’s nature would become part of us. Then we could escape our desires and the corrupt influences of this world.” In our spiritual family tree, we are the inheritors of the wealth of Peter, Job, Mark, the writer of Hebrews, Benedict, but especially Jesus and the spirit that was outpoured upon the disciples at Pentecost. **We are children of God.**

We are in the season of elections but soon into Thanksgiving, stewardship, and our mutual ministry review. We can all consider what allegiances and compromises we make with the world as we consider the wealth the grace of God has placed in our hands. What are the gifts we can offer the church, our church family, our community? What is our collective counter-narrative? We don’t need the novelty of the camel [although it would be nice to see it return for our 2025 Epiphany party]; we may offer it as stated by the late Frederick Buechner, simply, which reminds me of my Grandpa:

The grace of God means something like:

Here is your life.

*You might never have been, but you **are** because the party wouldn't have been complete without you.*

Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen.

Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us.

It's for you I created the universe. I love you.

There's only one catch.

Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it.

Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too.

Amen