

The Tiny Camel
Mark 10:23-27
February 11, 2018
Rev. Kelley L. Becker

*Lenten sermon series slide

Before I get started with the sermon this morning, I want to take a moment to share a few words about the upcoming season of Lent. First, you are invited to the Ash Wednesday service Wednesday at 7 pm. I hope you will come and share in this time of reflection which ends with the imposition of ashes and a circle outside around the fire pit. Three of our congregation's talented musicians will be helping to lead worship...Olivia Holder will play the flute, Vicky Glover will play the harp, and Noel Dagenette will sing.

And then, next Sunday, our Lenten series, "Keeping Time: Jesus' Last Week," begins. The series is based on a book by Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan called *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Last Week in Jerusalem*. The book begins with Palm Sunday, the day Jesus entered Jerusalem. Each chapter covers a different day of what we call Holy Week. Since the book begins with Palm Sunday, our series begins there too. So, next Sunday, the first Sunday of Lent, we will celebrate Palm Sunday. So be prepared to wave some palms next week!

*Sermon series title slide

Kelley (finding a pair of glasses on the pulpit): And one last pre-sermon piece of business, is anyone missing a pair of glasses. There is a pair here on the pulpit.

Scott: Those glasses remind me of a story Jamie Bennett told me, about a patient of hers.

The woman came into her office to return a pair of glasses that she purchased for her husband a week before.

The assistant asked, "What seems to be the problem, Madam?"

The woman replied, "I'm returning these glasses I bought for my husband. He's still not seeing things my way."

Kelley: Speaking of seeing...did you hear about the pirate who walked into a restaurant and the waitress said, "Hey, I haven't seen you in a while. What happened, you look terrible!"

"What do you mean?" the pirate replied, "I'm fine."

The waitress said, "But what about that wooden leg? You didn't have that before."

"Well," said the pirate, "We were in a battle at sea and a cannon ball hit my leg but the surgeon fixed me up, and I'm fine, really."

"Yeah," said the waitress, "But what about that hook? Last time I saw you, you had both hands."

"Well," said the pirate, "We were in another battle and we boarded the enemy ship. I was in a sword fight and my hand was cut off but the surgeon fixed me up with this hook, and I feel great, really."

"Oh," said the waitress, "What about that eye patch? Last time you were in here you had both eyes."

"Well," said the pirate, "One day when we were at sea, the waves were really rough and when I was on deck, I got splashed right in the eye with salt water."

"So?" replied the waitress, "You couldn't have lost an eye just from some salt water!"

"Well," said the pirate, "I really wasn't used to the hook yet."

Scott: Pirate jokes? The jokes are deteriorating fast! But, since you started it...What do you call a pirate with 2 arms, 2 legs, and 2 eyes?

Kelley: What?

Scott: A rookie.

Scott: What has 8 legs, 8 hands, and 8 eyes?

Kelley: I don't know...

Scott: 8 pirates.

It's good this is the last week for jokes. I should definitely stick to my day job. I hope you have enjoyed taking a little break from the seriousness of the world and laughing a little throughout this series. I have enjoyed preaching these stories and hearing your laughter.

I would like to begin by showing you a series of pictures and I ask you to suggest what they might have in common.

*When Pigs Fly

*When Frogs Grow Hair

*When Hens Have Teeth

*When Hell Freezes Over

What do these pictures have any common?

Each picture illustrates a phrase used to communicate something that is impossible. Our text today contains a similar phrase. This is the story of Jesus' encounter with the rich man.

*(Reading from the Scholars Version)

Let's take a closer look at what Jesus said. And we will start with my grandma's favorite Bible. It is a King James Red Letter Reference Addition. All of the words attributed to Jesus are printed in red letters. When I open this Bible to our text for today, there are a lot of words printed in red. We have to know, though, that it would be very unlikely for an author, who was not present at the time Jesus is reported to have said these words, to have been able to directly quote him to this extent.

This is where the work of the Jesus Seminar comes in. The Jesus Seminar is a group of scholars who have worked to determine what they believe to be the authentic words of Jesus. The scholars have done this through a very orderly, research-based, exhaustive process. And full disclosure...there are people who disagree vehemently with their work. I am not one of them. I think it's spot on and I think it is fascinating. How many of you are familiar with the Jesus Seminar?

*The culmination of their work on this has been published in this book, *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?* The book includes the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Thomas. This translation is called the Scholars Version and it is the version I read from this morning.

The Scholars Version also uses red letters for words attributed to Jesus. In addition to red letters, there are pink letters, gray letters, and black letters.

*Here is the explanation for the colors.

Red: That's Jesus! Jesus undoubtedly said this or something very much like it.

Pink: Sure sounds like Jesus. Jesus *probably* said something like this.

Gray: Well, maybe. Jesus did not say this, but the ideas contained in it are somewhat like Jesus'

Black: Not Jesus. Jesus did not say this. It represents the perspective or content of a later or different tradition.

As I mentioned, the scholars who worked on this had a very detailed system for making their decisions.

*The part of that system that applies to our text today has to do, for the most part, with what the scholars have identified as Jesus' style. Jesus' talk was distinctive---it can usually be distinguished from common lore. Otherwise, it would be impossible to search for the authentic words of Jesus.

Jesus' sayings and parables cut against the social and religious grain. They surprise and shock, calling for a reversal of roles or they frustrate ordinary, everyday expectations.

Jesus' sayings and parables are often characterized by exaggeration, humor, and paradox, some would even say sarcasm.

In today's text, there are no sentences that appear in red in the Scholars version of the text. There are, however, two sentences that are printed in pink, indicating Jesus probably said something very nearly like this.

*The first is verse 23, "How difficult it is for those who have money to enter God's domain." Scholars believe Jesus likely said this because it would have been shocking to his audience and would have contradicted the common belief of the day. In the ancient world, prosperity was seen as a reward or byproduct of spiritual virtue. For Jesus to say that being rich was not a reflection of exceptional character and virtue, was quite disturbing, especially for people who were rich! Sadly, there are preachers still preaching this faulty theology today. The prosperity gospel is alive and well, but it is not based on Jesus.

*The second pink statement in this passage is, "It's easier for a camel to squeeze through a needle's eye than for a wealthy person to get into God's domain." This is the kind of thing Jesus would have said because it is funny, exaggerated, and perhaps a little sarcastic.

We know that a camel fitting through the eye of a needle is not possible. It's a really funny mental picture, though. Artists have had a great time with it.

*(Show first two images of camels and needles.)

*And this cartoon, picturing a group of people trying to catapult a camel in the direction of a needle, "Yet another attempt to fit a camel through the eye of the needle."

*This one has a man with a needle in one hand and the camel's eyeball in another. The caption is, "I'm pretty sure it goes "camel through the eye of a needle," not the other way around."

The reason I have gone to such great lengths this morning to explain the scholarship behind this quirky little passage is that it gets misinterpreted a lot. In fact, I would venture to say that most of the time when I have heard people talk about it, they talk as if Jesus didn't really mean that a person can't have a lot of money and be part of God's realm. He can't possibly mean that, right? Because by the world's standards, everyone in this room is wealthy. It makes us very uncomfortable to consider that perhaps Jesus really meant what he said to the rich man. "Sell your stuff and give it to the poor." One scholar I read this week wondered if the man's feelings, stunned and dejected, were a result of hearing Jesus' words and knowing in his heart that he had to do that. Maybe he wasn't refusing to do it, but grieving doing it. How many of us have had feelings of dread as we prepared to do the right thing? Regardless, I understand why we are tempted to soften Jesus' words.

*Even the author of Mark, who wrote the words down in the first place, tried to soften them by saying, in verse 24, "Children, how difficult it is to enter God's domain." In this statement the author omitted the reference to money altogether and inserted the word "children," pointing the reader back to an easier passage, Mark 10:14. This is the passage that says, "Let the children come to me..." where Jesus was making the point that even children, who were among the most vulnerable and marginalized, were part of God's domain.

The author of Mark isn't the only one guilty of trying to soften what Jesus was saying.

*In fact, if we were to open my grandma's King James Bible, we would see that this same verse reads, "Children, how hard is it for them that

trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God,” as if the problem highlighted by the rich man was not being rich, but putting his faith in wealth and not God.

*And then there is the very popular story, made up by a 9th century interpreter, that has been trotted out over and over again by preachers. You may have heard it. It’s the story of the “eye of the needle” being a term for a low gate in Jerusalem through which camels could pass only if they hunched over with their cargo unloaded. If that interpretation was accepted, Jesus’ words would be watered down to mean only rich people who try hard and humble themselves could enter the realm of God. Being humble is good, as is trying to do the right thing. It all sounds good, but no such gate ever existed.

I’ve also heard that the Greek word for camel is similar to the word for the big rope that secures a ship. Maybe that’s what Jesus was talking about. But the reality is, that wouldn’t fit through a needle either, but it is one more attempt to make this passage more comfortable, anything but what it is. I’ve also heard preachers talk about this passage in terms of Jesus perceiving that wealth was the rich man’s weak spot or Achilles heel. This interpretation gives us permission to assume Jesus only wants us to part with the money or possessions we really cling to. So, we can’t keep our Rolls Royce, but the Mercedes is fine.

Here’s the deal, it seems as though Jesus really said, “It’s easier for a camel to squeeze through a needle’s eye than for a wealthy person to get into God’s domain.” It was funny and a little harsh, but that’s what he meant. And we need to deal with it if we want to try to follow his ways.

*How are we, in this time and place, supposed to understand what Jesus said?

This is what I've come to believe. The realm of God is a place of community. It is impossible to embrace community if things are more important than human beings. If we are preoccupied with managing our things, it is impossible to be in community. That's the truth. The realm of God is a place where everyone has enough. We cannot be fully connected to our neighbors if---they aren't going to eat today and we are going out to lunch where we will eat until we are beyond full. Or while our neighbors sleep under a bridge and we go home and light a fire in the fireplace? It's not comfortable or fun, but it's the truth.

But honestly, I don't think giving away all of our money and selling all of our stuff is the right thing in this time and place. We are called to be good stewards of what we have. I tend to think we can do a lot more with our resources if we are intentional about how we use them than if we just handed them to the next person walking down the street. My whole life I've heard Christians say, "Everything I have belongs to God." There's a part of me that thinks that's just church speak. The average person really doesn't have any idea what that means.

*What if we looked at our possessions and money this way, "How can I use _____ to create community and care for my neighbor?" How can I use my car? My home? My money? How can we use this facility to create community and care for our neighbors? Family Promise is one very clear example of this. I know there are others and I think we ought to always be inclined to say yes to ideas about ways to use this building for the good of the community. I don't want to be accused of softening Jesus' words either, so I will end with this, whatever you are doing or giving, do and give more because we are a long way from the beloved community God desires.

Now, I feel like I did a little bit of a bait and switch this morning. I promised you funny and ended up on a rather solemn note. I think I owe you a laugh.

Well, you know how choir directors are really hard to get along with...I heard a story about a feud between a minister and the choir director.

One week the preacher preached on commitment, and how the people should dedicate themselves to service. The director then led the choir in singing, 'I Shall Not Be Moved.'

The next Sunday, the preacher preached on giving and how they should gladly give to the work of the Lord. The choir director then led the song, 'Jesus Paid It All.'

The next Sunday, the preacher preached on gossiping and how we should watch our tongues. The choir director led the hymn 'I Love to Tell the Story.'

The preacher naturally became disgusted over the situation, and the next Sunday he told the congregation he was considering resigning. The choir then sang 'Oh, Why Not Tonight.'

When the preacher resigned the next week, he told the church that Jesus had led him there and Jesus was taking him away. The choir then sang, 'What A Friend We Have in Jesus.'
Amen.