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A Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost October 11, 2009
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Proper 23 Year B

In the time of Jesus, wealth and prosperity were considered the hallmark of God's favor. So it is no wonder the disciples were perplexed when Jesus said it will be hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus' words flaunted conventional wisdom. At the time, belief in resurrection was still a highly debatable doctrinal matter within Judaism. The majority of Jews did not believe in resurrection, so the only reward for good behavior one could expect came in this life, and, hopefully extended to one's children and grandchildren, as well. So, of course, the disciples were confused. Jesus saw that his disciples were having a tough time with this, so he repeated it for emphasis: *'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.'*

Jesus spent more time talking about money and the perils of wealth than any other topic, according to the Gospels so for us to try to explain away this hard saying of Jesus would be dangerous. Rather, I think we need to spend some time thinking about why Jesus said such disturbing things about wealth and the difficulties it presented for those who wanted to enter the kingdom of heaven. First, it is not clear that Jesus had an issue with wealth in and of itself. Rather, he seemed to consider wealth and what it could buy as distractions that draw our attention away from God.

Jesus was consistent in maintaining that wealth was an impediment we must overcome in order to accept God's real blessing: participation in the kingdom of God. The story of the rich young man who went away sad showcases for us how hard it is to say no thank you to the allure of wealth and what it can buy. The more wealth we have, the bigger and more compelling the distraction. That doesn't mean that the rest of us, the less well off, are home free. It just means that for people with less wealth, the compulsion to consume may be relatively easier to overcome. We probably don't even recognize it as a compulsion, it's just a given in our culture.

We learned early that we are measured by externals. We have been taught to think we will feel better about ourselves if we live in the "right" kind of house, and have the "right" kind of job, and drive the "right" kind of car, and eat at the "right" restaurants, and wear the "right" clothes. We learn to define ourselves by what we wear and what we buy, instead of how we think or feel. Our interactions with each other often are more about manipulation and competition than respect and sharing. We think we can reduce our fear and vulnerability by insulating ourselves from real commitments and real engagement. Our lives are more about "having" and 'doing' than 'being'.

Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

We have become, in a sense, like the man in the story. We, too, live in a culture that considers wealth and prosperity a sign of God's favor, despite 2000 years of Jesus' teaching to the contrary. Most of us probably can pretty much afford whatever we need and many things we don't need but only want, and for the most part, that suits us just fine. I was thinking this week about a man from a church I once served who went on a mission trip to Haiti to work in a medical clinic that the church had built and was funding. In conversation with one of the local people, he was called a rich man. He hastened to respond as many of us probably would – that he was not rich, he was just middle class, comfortable, he said.

The Haitian man looked eyes with him, and said "Tell me, my friend, do you eat every day?" Humbled, my friend could only nod 'yes'. "Well then," the Haitian continued, "in my country you are a very rich man." Certainly, by that standard we are all quite rich! We just manage to avoid thinking of ourselves that way most of the time, because we spend most of our time with other people like us.

But take us out of our comfort zone, plopping us down in Haiti, or Rwanda, or Afghanistan, or any of the so called developing nations and we are shocked to realize just how rich we really are. We all need that from time to time – a chance to restore our perspective. Call it a reality check. Not all of us can travel to the developing world but there are places we could go to experience the same shock of seeing how rich we are by comparison to others by visiting places a lot closer to home.

Spend a night as a volunteer in a homeless shelter or pass out lunches in Lafayette Park some day and sit and listen to the stories. It will help restore your perspective. I think that is what Jesus was trying to do for the rich young man: shock him into seeing himself more clearly. Shock him into seeing just how firmly attached he was to wealth and privilege – and how far he was from being the seeker after God that he thought himself to be. The rich man was following all the rules laid down by his culture to assure success, but apparently, he still had a big empty hole in the middle of his life where meaning was supposed to be. He lived scrupulously according to the law yet he realized he had lost sight of the heart of the law. He came to Jesus to find out what was missing. Like the man in the story, we come to Jesus to fill a hole in the middle of our lives.

Like the man in the story, we hope for easy answers. Like the man in the story, we are shocked to hear how high the price is. And like the man in the story, some of us go away sad, realizing how much we would have to give up to follow in the path of Jesus. We want to enter the reign of God but we want to do it on terms. And as Jesus made clear, it doesn't work that way. In the story, the man was told to give away all his possessions, but that was only the starting point. What he really needed to do was leave the life he knew behind and follow Jesus. You see, hard as it is, giving away money and possessions is not nearly enough, because, they don't really belong to us, anyway. We hold them as stewards by the grace of God.

What we really must learn to give away is the only thing that actually belongs to us: ourselves. That is what Jesus asked of the rich young man and that is what Jesus asks each of us. Come and follow me. It is a shocking and disturbing story and it shakes us to the core because when we hear it, we can't see how we can ever meet Jesus' tough standard. We are tempted to go away sad as the young man in the story did. But this is the Gospel of the Lord and there is always good news, and this

story includes the good news alongside the tough task. Jesus recognized that we cannot ever do this on our own. But, he said, what is impossible for human beings is possible with God. That is the promise of today's Gospel. God is waiting to help us. All we have to do is take the first step.