

Squeezing through the Needle's Eye

Pastor Mark Nieting

October 18, 2009

Mark 10: 23-31

When I was a kid growing up in Wisconsin, I had one of the first “man caves” going. My bedroom was down the basement. It was huge, with room for a ping pong table, my railroad layout, a work bench, and, of course, my desk and bed. The bad part, however, was that MY bed was DIRECTLY underneath my PARENT'S bed, a fact that will bear no more discussion. It was ALSO bad in that to get upstairs and outside, especially as I got older, I had to ascend a “creaky” stairway that I was never able to silence no matter how much WD-40 I would spray onto the nails. Once I was down there for the night, I was down to stay.

So I developed a strategy. There were 3 windows in my room, but 2 were set deeply into window-wells and couldn't be used. But the OTHER one, the other one, IF I stood on a small stool ON my bed, and IF I were absolutely silent, I could JUST squeeze myself out, and later on, squeeze myself back in.

In our Gospel text today, Jesus has just ended his encounter with the “rich young ruler,” as he is called in all 3 Synoptics. This devout young Jewish man had really tried to live according to the 10 Commandments came to Jesus because things *just didn't feel right to him*. He had a sneaky feeling...the kind in the pit of your stomach...that there was more to being to enter the Kingdom of God than just keeping rules and obeying commandments.

He was right.....and Jesus got right to the heart of the matter when He asked this fellow to sort out his priorities with a simple challenge: *Do you love ME... enough to sell all your stuff? Am I number ONE in your life?*

We know HIS answer: he couldn't do it....and walked away sadly, Jesus' loving eyes following until he's out of sight. Then Jesus turned to His disciples with a one sentence summary of what has just taken place: ***How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!***

TIME FOR A FACT CHECK! What does Jesus mean when He talks about being RICH? What is rich? WHO is rich? Am I rich? Are you rich? Our keynote speaker for the District Pastors' Conference this past week was John Nunes, an LCMS pastor who is the CEO of Lutheran World Relief. Here's the numbers on “rich:” 50% of the world's population, over 3 BILLION people, live on less than \$2.50 per day. That includes housing, clothing, food, transportation, and everything else that is necessary to keep them alive until the next day.....all for the amount of what most of us will chip in to the coffee fund this morning!

If Jesus is merely talking money, let's face it: we're ALL rich.

There's more to the story....and to be sure that his disciples GET IT, Jesus, the Master Teacher, uses an illustration. He grabs their attention by saying something HE can get away with ... but I really can't. He calls them *children*. In Greek it's *tekna*, not *paideia*, so he's not

calling them babies, but children. It's Jesus' way of saying that they still have a lot to learn, spiritually speaking.

Then Jesus used an example to follow his statement about entrance into the kingdom of God...the famous "camel through the eye of a needle." His words: *"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God."*

A camel through the eye of a needle? That's a no brainer, right? A camel is huge, stinky, and the last thing from being able to "limbo" itself through the tiny little space. There's NO way! Some have tried to "allegorize" Jesus' words here by saying that IF a camel got down on its knees and IF all the baggage was removed from the camel, and IF the camel lost a lot of weight, well then, just maybe, greased up like a pig, it might just slip though.

That's good logic, perhaps, creative interpretation to be sure, but it is LOUSY theology. Jesus' disciples wondered what He meant.... Mark describes them being amazed and wondering if ANYONE could be saved!!

Jesus looked at them and said, "With man, this is IMPOSSIBLE!" Notice what Jesus DIDN'T say....if someone tries harder, keeps more commandments, behaves better, gives more money, thinks the right thoughts.....all those things we put in the "Good Person" category.....they will "squeeze through" into the Kingdom of God. That's what Jesus DOESN'T say.

What He DOES say is that with GOD, ALL THINGS are possible. Because it is GOD who is doing the work. All of it. Every single bit of it. Luther agrees, in his meaning of the 3rd article: *I believe that I CANNOT by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to Him.* Camel or rope...it doesn't matter: if we're people of the world we won't get into the kingdom!

Carol Stoop, our THOUSAND HANDS speaker yesterday, shared with us that quite often she rides in taxis driven by Muslim men, and when they find out she is a Christian, they try to convert her by telling her all the things they have to DO to "be saved." She listens....and listens....and listens....depending on how long the trip is....and then, her words, not mine, slips a stone into their shoe with these simple words: *"I know someone who has already DONE all those things: Jesus! He did it by living a perfect life and then by dying for our sins."* And she adds, she did it for you.

It's Carol's way of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ, and she does it everywhere she goes. I don't ride in taxis with Muslim drivers very often, but I rub shoulders with people all the time who DO believe that by "good living and good luck" they too will squeeze into the kingdom of heaven. You know people like that too...and perhaps, just maybe, there's a little bit of that kind of thinking, that kind of theology left inside some of us!

This parable of Jesus is THE reason why we are embarking on ENVISION HOPE. Think of the people around you, people at work, at school, who live next door or even in your own

home who truly think that if they are GOOD ENOUGH, God will let them “squeeze” into His kingdom. We ALL know people like this, people whose priorities are all about earthly living, people who believe they can reap a heavenly reward by sowing wealth or popularity or hard work or good living rather than living life in Christ Jesus and accepting the gift God would LOVE to give them: faith in Christ and what He has already done. They will, when all is said and done at the end of time, and Jesus is clear on this, be *LAST*. *They will be LEFT out of the KINGDOM OF GOD.*

Next Sunday, when we will all be wearing RED, is the festival of the Reformation. Once again we’ll remember how Martin Luther himself worried about doing enough good and repenting of enough bad that he too might “squeeze” into God’s kingdom....until he found the truth of what Jesus Christ had already DONE for him.

Friends, years ago I might have been able to squeeze through my basement window, but there’s NO way I could, or you could, or anyone could squeeze into the Kingdom of Heaven without Jesus, who IS the way, the truth, and the life....the ONLY way from this life into heaven’s life.