

Sermon: Economic Healing Text: Mark 10:17-31 Lent 1 February 28, 2024
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The Silk Road or Silk Route was a trading network that connected East Asia to the Mediterranean world. Silk, spices, all kinds of goods were traded across vast distances over centuries. Established in the 2nd Century before Jesus and enduring through the Middle Ages, the worlds goods moved on the Silk Route. On its Western end, traversing arid deserts meant that camels were the carriers of goods.

The traders of the Arab lands bred camels for this purpose. The Bactrian camel could carry a large load a great distance, at high altitudes, in cold or hot weather, without the need to stop for water. Camels stood 6 ft at the shoulder, 7 feet at the head, were about 10 ft long and weighed about 1000 lbs. They could carry about 1000 lbs. of goods.

In the ancient near east in Jesus' day, a camel would be the biggest animal you might see with your own eyes.

Jesus says:" 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."

A camel is 7 ft tall, 10 ft long and weighs half a ton. A needle's eye is very small as any unskilled sewer, who has struggled to just thread a needle, can tell you.

When I was in Sunday School I heard that there was a gate in Jerusalem, which opened after the main gate was closed at night. It was said that a camel could not pass through the smaller gate unless it was stooped and had its baggage removed. This story has been told at least since at least the 11th century and possibly as far back as the 9th century. However, this story has no basis in fact.

Jesus compares the odds of a rich righteous man getting into heaven, to the odds that the biggest animal you ever saw could pass through the smallest opening you ever saw.

The image of a camel and a needles eye may have made Jesus' listeners laugh.

The idea that a rich person couldn't get into heaven would have shocked them.

There is a thread in the Hebrew Scriptures called the Doctrine of the Two Ways. It suggests that those who are blessed with wealth and health are blessed by God- they earned their good fortune, and that those who are poor or ill are under God's judgement. In the common world view of Jesus time, if a rich man can't get into heaven, someone clearly blessed by God, then who can? So the disciples say after listening to Jesus, "Then who can be saved?"

The Doctrine of the Two Ways is one thread in the Hebrew tradition. That way of thinking is alive and well in our world now. The Prosperity Gospel is a modern Christian variant of this doctrine.

The Hebrew Scriptures also have threads that argue against the doctrine of the two ways - asserting that that God actually has a particular concern, a preference for the poor.

The Book of Job is a discussion of the Doctrine of the 2 ways and comes out strongly against it.

There are more than 2000 verses of Scripture that speak of poverty and of the need for economic justice.

The prophets call for economic justice, proclaiming that how we treat the poor and marginalized matters far more than religious observance...

Jesus expresses solidarity with those in need- I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me drink... sick or in prison and you visited me... Whatever you do for the least of these you do for me....

And the poor are still with us

- One in 7 people in Canada lives below the poverty line.
- 15% of people with disabilities live in poverty.
- One in 5 racialized families live in poverty in Canada, as opposed to 1 in 20 non racialized families.
- 15% of elderly single individuals live in poverty.
- 40% of Indigenous children in Canada live in poverty,
- And 60% of Indigenous children on reserves live in poverty.

The distribution of wealth in Canada is unequal and the gap is growing. The top 20% of households in Canada own about 67% of the nation`s wealth and the bottom 20% of households in Canada own less than 1%.

And globally the numbers are staggering;, according to Oxfam, 26 people globally owned the same portion of the world`s wealth as the 3.8 billion people who make up the poorest half of humanity: the top 26 people have as much wealth as the bottom 4 billion people.

We might understand that economic injustice on the scale as we see it in our world, would not fit with the vision that God has for our world. Jesus says 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.”

There is another way to see this gospel story we shared today. The rich man comes to Jesus, kneels, and asks his question of Jesus. Everywhere else in Mark's gospel, when a person kneels down to ask something of Jesus (verse 17), it is followed by an act of healing,

Is this story of the rich man and Jesus a healing story? In asking the man to give all his wealth to the poor, is Jesus offering a radical prescription to a deep-seated illness and need?

Are there spiritual perils that come with wealth?

Does wealth create the temptation to believe that one is self-made and self-sufficient with no need for God or others?

Does wealth desensitize a person to the needs of others and of those who are not wealthy?

Does the man's wealth keep him from being more than he is; does it hold him back, keep him from being fully compassionate, from a full commitment to God?

Jesus asks the rich man not simply to give all his wealth away, but to give it to the poor. Is he being challenged to see the poor as valuable, as blessed, as loved by God?

And we can note that Jesus, the gospel says, looks on the rich man with love. Jesus does not treat him as insincere or mock him as self-righteous; however it is that we read this story; we must take seriously Jesus' absolute regard and unconditional love for this man who kneels before him.

To be full of things is to be empty of God. To be empty of things is to be full of God. – so wrote the mystic Meister Eckhart. Perhaps, whether we are richer or poorer, there may be things we need let go of, so that we can be full of the blessings God would give. In this season of Lent may we be filled with the good gifts God that would give.

Amen