

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY,
OCTOBER 14, 2018,
AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN
CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

The story goes that before performing a baptism, the minister approached the young father and said solemnly, "Baptism is a serious step. Are you prepared for it?"

"I think so," the man replied. "My wife has made appetizers and we have a caterer coming to provide plenty of cookies and cakes for all of our guests."

"I don't mean that," the priest responded. "I mean, are you prepared

spiritually?"

"Oh, sure," came the reply. "I've got a keg of beer and a case of whiskey."

Faith is linked to many things in the gospels. Here it is linked to actual riches - - not the spiritual kind, but dollars and sense, if you will, in one of the most familiar stories of the New Testament. A rich young man, called "good" because he was deeply religious, comes to speak with Jesus about how he (the man) might inherit eternal life. I believe he had an inkling that it might involve some kind of sacrifice on his part or he would not be asking about it in the first place. He knows more is required of him.

Whether or not he is surprised to learn that eternal life entails the surrender of one's whole self is an entirely different thing, and when he realizes what is required, he goes away disappointed, like a puppy dog with its tail between its legs. It's the sole time Jesus invited someone to be a disciple only to be refused.ⁱ The passage puts before us contrasting desires that mark our lives: wealth and generosity...money and abundant sharing...riches and the drive to be a blessing to others. While wealth is hard to define, the importance of a generous heart is central to the life of a Christian.ⁱⁱ

If we think about it, there is a lot of the rich, good man in all of us. We know that

money cannot buy us happiness, but we act as if it could. Contemporary advertising continuously bombards us with the message that the more we own the greater our wealth and sense of well-being. And finally, we like what we own and have a hard time parting with it. Plus I'm sure, like the disciples, most particularly Peter, we want to know what is in it for us? Will my faithfulness and support be rewarded? How will my participation in church activities be a blessing in life? Will I get a reward and in what form will it come to me?ⁱⁱⁱ All these thoughts keep the story swirling around in our heads, and in the end, like the story of the mustard seed and faith we heard about last week, we know

what we must do and whom we must be. And then, only then, will we know what's in it for us.

Roy Almquist, pastor at Washington Memorial Chapel at Valley Forge says "So what's in it for you and for me? I think a cornucopia of blessings is promised:

- The joy of being a part of a holy enterprise that seeks to bring hope and purpose and transformation into the lives of many who are lost and confused;
- The holy calling to exchange a lust to accumulate material things for a passion to engage with people, particularly people in need.

- . The blessing of a shared life with wonderful people, who are inspired by common values and a desire to bring justice and truth and beauty to life;
- . The promise of a life beyond this brief span of years, when we will be gathered with those who have gone before us in a place where there will be no pain or suffering.^{iv}

One can see, therefore, that having riches has its own merits. I don't believe Jesus really believed that the rich, young man would actually take him up on his challenge and Jesus was probably surprised when the man walked away from the opportunity to be a disciple. I think that Jesus meant merely to see

how far the man was willing to go with his intentions. It reminds me of the super hero movies, where the narrator asks, "Is there no one who will rise to take on this opponent? Who will save us? If the richest among us will not stand for the gospel, where is our hope?" Of course there is more to the story, and is usual for *Mark*, it involves one of Jesus' most famous parables with one of the most visually memorable stories of all the gospels. In what was one of my favorite stories from Sunday School, Jesus relates the tale of the camel going through an eye of a needle as a way to speak about faith. Mark

writes “Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!’ The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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.’ The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, ‘Who then can be saved?’”

According to the writings of one of my former Connecticut colleagues, The Rev. David Sellery, the passage suffers from a potential mistake in translation, and here's where the fragility of literal interpretation comes in. While various

translations agree on the concept of the eye of the needle, there is a likely alternative for the camel reference that might have been created by a 2nd Century typo. The Greek word *kamilos* for camel might really have been *kamelos* for rope. The concept of threading a needle with a rope seems to be more logical than threading it with a camel. And what is plainly impossible with a camel, is merely extremely unlikely, but still conceivable, with a rope. Another school of thought refers to the eye of the needle as the tiny secret entrance through the walls of an ancient city. Theoretically a camel could pass through such a hole in the wall, but it would require removing all its baggage

and getting down on its knees to crawl or be dragged through. While this interpretation has been largely discredited, it colorfully illustrates the impediments of wealth and power.^v And there are other translations to consider as well. Interestingly enough, no matter what translation you read or how you feel about the text, they each relate back to money and our responsibility towards it as relates to the kingdom of heaven. In short we need to get our spiritual and financial affairs together, and as one can see, they are not mutually exclusive.

This gospel passage, full of what I call “notable quotables” also gifts us with

the progressive thinking that “with God all things are possible.” That is one of my favorite sayings from the bible, mainly because if it be true, it reassures folks like me that have lived at the fringe our entire lives. I link it to “God shows no partiality,” both of which are important to my way of thinking as to why God cares for everyone, particularly the poor and outcast with an eye and ear open to the voices of the rich and wealthy. The kingdom, the beloved community of God, is open to all. This is not a usual take on the gospel, but I believe it is fair. And then we get to that last line, thrown out at us like a fastball from the pitcher’s mound, but with no commentary: “But many that are first shall be last, and the

last first.” This is the final answer to “but whom shall be saved,” and it will make some folks happy and others miserable. I know from personal experience. Back in 1990s I owned an auction house and antique store in White Plains, NY, and we specialized in house clean-outs; the bigger and more difficult the job the better. On one particular location we contracted to empty the entire contents of the house in 24 hours. I had a good crew, but as the day drew on I knew we were not going to finish on time. My workers were tired, they had been working since 7 a.m. and they wanted to go home. I paid them what we had agreed upon and they began to pack up. Now this

required some fancy footwork, so to speak; I had to find evening workers to finish the job. I got on the phone and within half an hour I had who I needed to move forward. I agreed to pay them the same rate I'd paid the others and, fresh blood I guess, we finished the job in half the time that the others had been working. Good job, on to tomorrow's challenges. Except that's not how things went down. When the workers who had worked all day found out that they were paid the same rate as those who had worked half the time they were furious. They came to see me to complain. "As the owner and the boss, don't I have the right to pay workers as I see fit?" "Yes," they replied. "Then what's the issue?" I

tried using the bible (my first mistake – it’s interesting that folks believe or don’t believe as it suits them). “We were here first,” they proclaimed. “We did work you weren’t cut out for,” fired back a member of the later crew. “You’re a second-rate worker anyway. That’s why he didn’t call you in the first place!” and so on, and so on. When I mentioned the biblical imperative that the first shall be last and the last first, I thought we were headed for fisticuffs! We eventually settled it all, but not without some hard feelings on both sides. Moral: Don’t use the bible to try to settle secular affairs. It may cost you - - in more ways than one. There is a lot of work to be done to have eternal life and to enter into the beloved

community of God. It is not all ethereal either. Forget the riches; some of it requires just good old sweat and tears. I found this selection by Charles Osgood that speaks to the nowadays:

There was a most important job that needed to be done,
And no reason NOT to do it, there was absolutely none.

But in vital matters such as this, the thing you have to ask
Is WHO exactly will it be who'll carry OUT the task.

Anybody could have told you that
Everybody knew
That this was something SOMEBODY would surely have to do.
Nobody was unwilling. Anybody had the

ability.

But NOBODY believed that it was his responsibility.

It seemed to be a job that ANYBODY could have done.

If Anybody thought he was supposed to be the one.

But since Everybody recognized that Anybody could

Everybody took for granted that SOMEBODY would.

But Nobody told Anybody that we are aware of,

That he would be in charge of seeing it was taken care of.

And Nobody took it on himself to follow through,

And DO what Everybody thought that
Somebody would do.

When what Everybody needed so did
not get done at all,
Everybody was complaining that
Somebody dropped the ball.
Anybody then could see it was an awful
crying shame,
And Everybody looked around for
SOMEBODY to blame.

Somebody should have done the job
And Everybody should have,
But in the end Nobody did
What Anybody could have.^{vi}

I'm not sure how much fodder one can
put in a sermon, but there is a lot here
for both the rich and the poor to ponder.

Happy travels on the way to eternal life
throughout God's kingdom!

Amen.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.
Pastor, BBCC

ⁱ wmchapel.org/2012/10/whats-in-it-for-me-mark-10-17-31

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v http://www.ralphconnor.ca/downloads/Sermon_18October2015.pdf

^{vi} <http://saltforsermons.org.uk/category/responsibility/>