

Sermon: October 18, 2015 Mark 10:17-31
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

The rich young ruler. A camel unable to pass through the eye of a needle. It begins with an encounter with Jesus, which leads into a saying by Jesus, and both of these make it clear that Christ is unafraid to confront the topic of wealth and its relationship to our present relationships and our eternal destiny. The easy-to-picture encounter with the Rich Young Ruler, and the impossible-to-envision image of a very large camel squeezing through a very tiny opening, were direct challenges to Jesus' audience and they force me (on this day before a Federal Election) to do my own personal gut check about what really matters to me and to my Lord.

There have been volumes written about the camel and the needle, and because of this I don't want to just take one approach to this curious text. Instead, I'm going to share three traditional angles, as presented by three contemporary commentators.

I'll start with the one you've most likely heard before, shared by many including online Catholic commentator Tiffany Germain. I first heard this interpretation about thirty years ago and immediately loved it because it underlined the importance of understanding a scripture in its original context. It goes like this: there is a small gate in the city of Jerusalem called "the eye of the needle." Not only small, but hard to find – hidden, perhaps even secret. This gate was so named because of its shape and because it is tiny. A person can walk through the gate with no problem, but for a camel it's another matter entirely.

Camels were the delivery vans of their day, and in many cases still are, able to carry up to 600 pounds of goods. Because the gate called "the eye of the needle" is narrow, a camel would need to be unburdened of all its goods and its saddle in order to pass through. Because the gate is not very high, in addition to having its cargo removed a camel would need to get down on its knees and either crawl through the gate or get dragged through.

So taken this way, the camel needs to leave all its earthly goods behind AND humble itself, down on its knees, to go through this particular gate. As words that immediately follow the story of the Rich Young Ruler, who was pretty proud about his spiritual accomplishments and tragically unwilling to leave his earthly goods behind to save his soul, there is a lovely flow from one section to the next. And as Ms. Germain notes, if you go to Jerusalem there are tour guides who can show you a tiny little out-of-the-way passage called "the eye of the needle," one of the twelve gates to the city, which would seem to pretty much prove this interpretation.

Problem is, scholars of the Ancient Near East find absolutely nothing to suggest that such a gate existed in Jesus' day, nor any reason why such an impractical gate would be desirable. While I'm not entirely willing to abandon this interpretation, because it dovetails so perfectly with the story of the Rich Young Ruler, it appears that some devout Christian about a thousand years ago came up with this allegorical interpretation, re-named a seldom-used passageway and started making money off of pilgrims willing to pay to see anything referred to in the Bible. It could be that such a gate existed in the times of Jesus, but the overall weight of thought is that the "eye of the needle" gate was a later creation, designed to fit the story, and that the camel and needle analogy meant something else.

Rev. David Sellery, an Episcopal Priest in Connecticut, shares the second option for this text. He writes, "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 [and Aramaic scholar George Lamza points out that the same word was used for both camel and rope in Aramaic, since many ropes in the day were made from camel's hair]. 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 extremely unlikely, but still conceivable, with a rope."

Like the picture of a camel needing to strip off its cargo, the image of a rope needing to get peeled back until nothing is left but a single thread, makes Jesus' point just as forcefully, perhaps more forcefully. We can picture how many fibres would be twisted together into yarn, and how many strands of yarn would be twisted or braided into rope and how painstaking it would be to separate out one strand from all that. And I don't know about you, but I find it kind of hilarious picturing some wealthy buffoon with an inch-and-a-

half thick rope in one hand, and a sewing needle in the other. With the wry sense of humour we see in Jesus' sayings and parables, I think the kamilos/kamelos argument has quite a bit of merit.

A third angle at the Eye of the Needle, etc. comes from an unexpected source. As I was popping around the internet I found the blog of Buzz Dixon, whose day job is cartoon-book writer for Marvel Comics. His side project, is a blog of social and religious commentary which is both profanity-laden and very astute. Buzz is not particularly interested in trying to explain this scripture in either of the ways I've outlined thus far; he thinks that Jesus' words are intentionally absurd and any explanation lessens their impact.

"Let me explain it to you:" writes Buzz.

"A camel' = a great [honking] big animal

"the eye of a needle' = that leeeetle tiny hole at the end of the thin thin thin pointy metal thing you use to sew cloth together

"a rich man' = anybody who has two shirts when somebody else has none

"the kingdom of heaven' = to be in communion with God both here & now and the hereafter

"Jesus was fond of using ridiculous hyperbole to prove his points. For instance, 'why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?' [This does not lead us to think that] people were walking around with six foot long weaver's beams in their eyes while criticizing their neighbors for having a speck of dust in theirs. Obviously a physical impossibility, but Christ wasn't interested in telling something literally factual but rather spiritually true.

"Likewise [when Jesus said] 'if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out'... I don't think Jesus expected anybody to take that as a serious command, but rather that we should remove from our lives anything that might cause us to harm another person or allow another to come to harm.

"So the point he was getting across re camel / needle / rich man was this: **If you are more interested in lining your own pocket than in seeing justice is done, you aren't going to hell...you're already there.**"

And then Buzz quotes from a source well-known to us, the late theologian Marcus Borg, who wrote,

"The Christian life is not about pleasing God the finger-shaker and judge. It is not about believing now or being good now for the sake of heaven later. It is about entering a relationship in the present that begins to change everything now. Spirituality is about this process: the opening of the heart to the God who is already here."

One of the things I have noticed in my kids' approach to the world: things that are random, ironic or absurd score extra points, so when Buzz Dixon brings us back to the absurdity of Christ's words, he's on to something quite contemporary. And he makes a very big point, reminding us that the eternal life desired by the Rich Young Ruler is not just something we connect with after death; a commitment to the Kingdom of God, the realm of Shalom, forces us to be in right relationships with our neighbours here and now.

So there are three interpretations to ponder for a bit: the eye of the needle as a camel gate to Jerusalem, a rope going through the eye of a needle, the absurdity of a camel attempting to traverse a needle.

Now, moving back one step, what about the first part of today's reading, the encounter between Jesus and the Rich Young Ruler which sets up the "eye of the needle" saying? Well, first off it is odd that Rich Young Ruler is his traditional name, for nothing in any of the gospels specifically suggests he was young, or that he was a ruler, but perhaps that discussion waits for next time. For whether he was young or not, a ruler or not, he was eager to see Jesus and had reason to be optimistic. He was a faithful, obedient follower of God, learning from an early age how to fulfill the Ten Commandments, and other Jewish laws. Though wealthy, there is no suggestion that his wealth is ill-gotten, but one part of his life was askew: his love of stuff was greater than the amount he loved God and loved his neighbour. Looking him right in the eyes with the full compassion of God, Jesus encouraged him to trust in God's gracious love rather than relying on his own actions. Had he known it, all the rich man had to do was the same thing we can do:

that is, say “I can’t do that on my own, Lord Jesus, I’m going to need your help.” But instead he went away, still wealthy, but despondent.

Without losing sight of the fact that Jesus was speaking specifically about wealth, there’s a bigger picture, too, in the way Jesus invites the rich man to a new way of living. In the tradition of many great religious teachers, Jesus puts before the wealthy man two of the big concepts, already familiar to Buddhists, Hindus and Taoists: non-attachment, and giving alms. Jesus spots this young man’s attachment to his possessions, deeper than his desire to live in favour with God and in harmony with his neighbour, and urges him to be rid of it. Then, with the money realized from selling his stuff, and freed from that attachment, he could turn all of it into a life-changing gift for the poor. Two simple actions, two great steps along the path to spiritual freedom.

When we were doing our weekly Bible Study on Friday, our host, Margaret turned a great phrase: Jesus wants us to be careful about what we LEAN on. Do we completely rely on the love of God, or do we lean on something else? Does our peace of mind come from a knowledge that we are beloved by God, or do we lean on the relative health of our financial investments? Is my sense of God’s love truly unconditional, or do I lean on those special skills or abilities or attributes that make me a unique, noticeable contributor in my family and my circle of friends and my community as I search for self-worth? The rich man who ran up to Jesus leaned heavily on two things: his pride at being so obedient to the law, and the wealth he had accumulated, and Jesus called him to lean on God instead.

The dejection of the rich man, who could not let go of his wealth, moves immediately to the saying we examined earlier. As the rich man sulked away, Jesus said it was easier for a camel/rope to pass through the eye of a needle, than for the wealthy to really give themselves to the ways of the Kingdom of God. Note that Jesus didn’t say these tasks were *similar*, he said that the task of the camel/rope was EASIER. So let’s revisit those three viewpoints:

1. A camel needs to leave its load behind in order to get through the short, skinny gate. True that, but I add a wee warning: this interpretation would not imply that it would be OK for the rich man to live in selfish luxury on this side of the gateway, and only shed the wealth once it was time for him to walk through that Heavenly portal at the end of his earthly life.
2. A rope needs to get stripped down to a single strand in order to be threaded into a needle. That pretty much fits with what Jesus demands of the rich man, though I admit it may lack the pizzazz of an unloaded camel shimmying through a gate.
3. A camel cannot pass through the eye of a needle, it is impossible, and it is impossible for the obscenely wealthy to be fully engaged in the Kingdom of God. This choice was clearly set before the rich man, and he chose the lucrative and the lesser.

By presenting three different viewpoints, each of which I have some degree of sympathy for, I think I’m standing in the great tradition of the United Church of Canada, encouraging a diversity of approaches and interpretations as we together seek to live as Christ’s people in the world. And that is definitely one of my goals today – to encourage you to find where and how scripture impacts your world view, and to allow your understandings of Christ to impact your decision-making.

What I don’t want to do, though, is to leave it so open that it all just drifts off into a casual endorsement of where we are right now. In every age, we are reminded of the gap between the rich and the poor and a report by Credit Suisse just this week indicated that the richest 1% now officially control 50% of the world’s wealth. What a sickening figure, especially with the spotlight of Christ’s words about wealth shining on it. We live amidst the brokenness of a world that rewards the haves and punishes the have-nots, and Christ calls us as individuals, as a congregation, as a town, as a province, as a nation, as human beings, to change that by living lives committed to abundant life for ALL. The way we spend our money, the way we spend our time, the way we cast our votes, all intersect with this call to really give ourselves over, heart and soul, to Christ’s path of Shalom. We don’t buy our way into heaven by selling off our stuff, but make no mistake about it: our attachment to money and other things of this earth is a distinct barrier to the right relationships that Christ proclaims. Jesus looks us all right in the eyes, with the same loving gaze described in the gospel of Mark, and earnestly hopes that we don’t find ourselves looking away and saying, “sorry, Lord, that depth of love for you and my neighbour is a price I’m unwilling to pay. I’m going to keep leaning on what I’ve always leaned on.”

In the presence of Christ's wisdom, in the assurance of Christ's grace, in the blessed company of those who follow Christ's love in the way they live their lives, may these Words of scripture bring life and hope and guidance. Amen.

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PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE – October 18, 2015 (GW)

Our prayers today, Source of Love, are both personal and global.

In your presence, we lay before you anything that is getting in the way of being the people of reconciliation and love and encouragement that you call us to be - familiar and unhealthy ways that we lean on, rather than trusting on your loving presence. Whether it impacts our closest relationships or our relationship with the world, we invite your love into that space, to work with us to be the people you would have us be.

We name to you in a time of silent prayer the burdens we bring with us today, lifting to you the names of those who need your restorative touch in their lives... may your love be tangible in the lives of those who face difficulties, and may your joy be real and sustainable for those who have experienced hopeful changes. In Christ you have shown the power of resurrection; may that be real for all who need newness in their lives.

We lay before you the life and work of this congregation. Help us to find balance, as we express care for one another while remaining attentive to the needs of the community around us. Help us to be wise and generous in our use of the human and material resources at hand. Help us to enjoy the camaraderie of the Holy Spirit, while allowing ourselves to be stretched and challenged. Help us truly be disciples of Christ.

And we place before you the choices facing our nation. May your will and wisdom be a powerful presence for all concerned – candidates, party workers, elections officials, and voters. Reach out to those who take the importance of voting for granted, O God, and give them the get-up and go, to get-out and vote; and we bring to mind so many of our sisters and brothers in other lands can only dream of the ability to vote in a free and fair election, that they may soon know freedom, and that we may we honour them by our actions. May your graceful and generous spirit be seen on Monday and in the days that follow. Amen