



Threading the Needle

Mark 10:17-31

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The wealthy man in this story went away shocked and grieving. After all, he'd kept all God's commands – now Jesus says he has to give up all he has as well! It surprised him, and it was very surprising to the disciples.

New Testament society was organized much differently than what we know. Put yourself in their world. We're used to every-increasing everything; our economy's built on production, expansion. For them, life is a "zero-sum game": there's only a finite amount of resources available, and one person's increase in wealth means someone else loses – usually, those with the least power to resist. We'd expect resentment.

But interestingly enough, and not just in Middle Eastern societies, the powerful, the wealthy, assumed a burden of charity, helping the poor, the widows and orphans. Giving to these groups is an obligation, and a way you showed off your wealth. If you have money and power, well, you have food and can do things – not to mention put people in your debt: how could you not be happy?

It doesn't work that way, does it? These are Paul Simon's lyrics inspired by Edward Arlington Robinson's poem, *Richard Cory*:

“They say that Richard Cory owns half of this whole town,
With political connections, to spread his wealth around;
Born into society, a banker's only child,
He had everything a man could want: power, grace, and style.

The papers print his picture almost everywhere he goes:
Richard Cory at the opera, Richard Cory at a show;
And the rumor of his parties, and the orgies on his yacht!
Oh, he surely must be happy, with everything he's got.

But I, I work in his factory; and I curse the life I'm living,
And I curse my poverty;
And I wish that I could be Richard Cory.

He freely gave to charity; he had the common touch,
And they were grateful for his patronage, and they thanked him very much;
So my mind was filled with wonder when the evening headlines read:
Richard Cory went home last night and put a bullet through his head.

But I, I work in his factory; and I curse the life I'm living,
And I curse my poverty;
And I wish that I could be Richard Cory."

The speaker wishes he were Richard Cory dead rather than live his own miserable existence.

We know that money doesn't buy happiness, but we're still surprised, even critical, when the rich and famous are despondent. The disciples who witnessed Jesus' exchange with the wealthy man were not only taken back by the man's shock and sadness, they were even more amazed by Jesus' words: "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God!" After all, the wealthy can give to charity; they can help the poor; they can afford to support the Temple and buy lots of sacrifices; they have the time and the means to do the requirements of the religious law and live clean, holy lives instead of working all the time! If the rich can't be happy, if the rich can't be saved, *who can?*

If someone so committed to living rightly, living justly, as this man was – keeping all the rules – if someone like this will have to push himself through the eye of a needle to get into God's Kingdom, then who *can* follow Christ's path to it?

Truthfully, based on our own efforts, no one. And there's the good news: to get into God's Kingdom may be impossible, but impossible things are God's specialty. Jesus answer to the disciples turns things upside down. The question isn't: if the rich will find it so hard, who can be saved? But rather, if you will follow me, *even* the rich can be saved.

What Jesus did for the wealthy man is what Christ still does to us: Jesus looked at him, loved him, pointed out the one thing that needed to change, and told him to go fix it. Jesus looks us over, sees a lot of wonderful potential, and helps us see in us what's getting in the way of following him, of living a Godly life, of entering the Kingdom.

You know, this passage isn't really about money, is it? "Wealth" wasn't just money then, and it isn't now; Mark tells us the would-be disciple "had many possessions," that was the issue. He had a lot of *stuff*.

Stuff! Stuff gets in the way. Stuff can take over our lives, can't it? Ever wondered about a house you might buy, whether it had enough room for your stuff? Had boxes unopened for years, full of stuff? You're not alone – though you might be, if you haven't got 'em! Valerie and I accumulated all sorts of things in our travels and living in so many different places: so far, I think five truckloads have already made it to the patio sale, not to mention the lawnmowers and snow blowers and other *stuff* we sold before we came –

and you have all heard about my storage locker in Albuquerque! Stuff...sitting in a locker at \$35 a month since 2003! Makes you think of pack rats, doesn't it?

We've got one of those, too. Invited himself in to set up housekeeping in our grill, then started renovating the place – amazing how much noise those little things can make. Bang! Wham! We couldn't even watch TV with all the racket.

So I went out and opened the lid to see what was going on. Here were these two beady little black eyes glaring at me, daring me to disengage him from HIS stuff, about twenty pounds of mesquite pods, cactus cuttings, and bird feathers. A treasure trove.

One he's not willing to leave, either.

Things can take us over, just like that rat took over our grill. In drug and alcohol programs, there's an old saying: First the person takes a drink, then the drink takes a drink, then the drink takes the person. Stuff – whatever you have or want that gets in the way – does the same thing. It wasn't that the wealthy man had “many possessions” – it was that his possessions had *him*.

We like to believe that money and possessions give us freedom to do and be what we like. Sometimes that idea has merit, at least by our logic. But Jesus reminds us that the Kingdom of God is different – it's the place where nothing's the way we expect it to be, nothing's like it is now, and however uncomfortable that sounds, the Kingdom's way is better, it's the right way for things to be. We cannot let what we have weight us down – we need to hold on to the things of this world lightly. Hold on lightly – don't pour yourself into them.

What Jesus tells us is that to enter the Kingdom of God, we have to be unencumbered by stuff, we have to be ready to drop our bags and our packs and whatever else we're carrying, so that we can be free to move and respond to the Spirit's call, able to leave *stuff* behind when we need to move fast.

My college offered a bunch of really great semesters overseas; I could have gone – I even envied friends who went. But I didn't. I was afraid I'd miss something on campus! That was a long time ago; we probably all have similar lost opportunities. But let me ask you this: What could you do, what would you be if you weren't lugging around stuff, attachments to things and habits and routines? Don't say, “I'm retired, I'm settled; been there, done that:” we're all still alive, and God's in the business of starting new things – right up to (and including) the end.

And don't be discouraged. Remember, getting that camel through the eye of that needle wasn't going to be *easy*, just *possible*.

So here's a prayer for you: one for the road, one for the eye of the needle:

God, take away everything that stands between me and my usefulness to you and to others – and help me see what those things are!