

AUGUST 27, 2017

ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

MATTHEW 19: 16-26

“CAMELS AND NEEDLES”

In April, 1941, Germany attacked Yugoslavia and conquered it pretty quickly. As the Nazi armies approached Belgrade the capital, King Peter and his cabinet members decided to get out of the country fast. So they lined up a plane to fly them to Jerusalem. But before they went they committed a crime together. They pillaged the National Bank of their own nation. They especially got all the gold out of the bank----10 large cases of gold. The king, the cabinet ministers, and the 10 cases of gold were all crammed into the plane and they took off for Palestine shortly before the Germans got to the capital.

During the flight, they ran into a storm and the turbulence was quite bad. The cases of gold had been stacked up in the plane and the shaking of the plane in the storm caused one of the cases to shift, fall off the stack, and land on one of the cabinet ministers. He was crushed to death----which shows that gold can be dangerous!

Gold, money, wealth---yes, very dangerous indeed! Especially to our souls.

We see this in today's gospel reading----Matthew 19:16-26. In this gospel, a man commonly called “the rich young ruler” comes up to Jesus and asks Him in verse 16---“Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?” He wanted to save his soul and wanted the Lord to tell him how. A good question indeed! Christ answers the wealthy fellow in verse 17----“If you would enter life, keep the commandments.” The man then asks which commandments he should keep? And Jesus lists for him several of the 10 Commandments. The man then says in verse 20----“All these I have observed; what do I still lack?” An interesting reply! He claims to have followed all the 10 Commandments—and perhaps he had sincerely been trying to do so. But he knew he needed to do something more----so he says, “What do I still lack?”

Christ answers that question in a very straight forward way in verse 21-----“If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” Jesus tells the rich young ruler-----If you wish to have eternal life, sell your possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow me. This was too much for the young man. As we read in verse 22---“When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions.” Give everything to the poor? He thought that was just too much for him. And so, in a very sad passage, he walks away from Jesus.

It is certain that in the 4 gospels the Lord does not always ask everyone who wishes to follow Him to get rid of all they own by giving it all to the poor. But we should be willing to do it if He does ask us. And there are those He does ask to do that----our monks and nuns have done just that thing in obedience to what God has called them to do.

He doesn't ask everyone to do that, but He does ask this particular man to do so. Why? Probably because he was so attached to his money and possessions that he was being spiritually destroyed by them. (And that's a worse fate than that suffered by that Yugoslav government official crushed by a case of gold.) Christ knew the man's heart---the only hope of saving his soul was a drastic breaking of his strong attachment to his money. Giving it all away. But he was not about to do that---the attachment was too strong.

After this sadness, Christ goes on to talk to His disciples about how hard is it is for a rich person to be saved. Verse 23---"And Jesus said to His disciples, 'Truly, I say to you, it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, 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.'" It's tough for a rich man to make it to heaven---as tough as getting a camel through the eye of a needle!

I do very little sewing-----very, very little. If it's needed, I have to get Bonnie to do it. There have been a few very rare occasions where I have tried to fix a tear or attach a button. Not a pretty thing. First, I have a rough time finding the needle and thread. Then, getting the thread through that little eye of the needle is a hard thing for me---tough to get it. So the thought of getting a camel through the eye of a needle is mind-boggling to me!

Of course, our Lord was using hyperbole here---an absurd example to get a point across. The camel example is absurd but the point is simple---it's real tough for the soul of a rich man to be saved. Repeating what our Lord said in verses 23-24---"Truly, I say to you, it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, 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."

The disciples are shocked by this. The usual way of thinking back then was that it was the poor who would have the hardest time getting saved, and that the rich would have an easier time of it. What a surprise that it was the rich who would have the toughest time! And so their response in verse 25---"When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, 'Who then can be saved?'" But Jesus now encourages them in verse 26---"Jesus looked at them and said to them, 'With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.'"

Humanly speaking, it is impossible for a rich man to be saved. A camel can't get through the eye of a needle. And wealthy people can't make it into heaven. But...God can do the impossible. (You may have noticed that it appears Jesus is quoting here our Ohio state motto---"With God all things are impossible." Well, not quite.....He coined the phrase long ago and our state has been copying Him.....)

So it is possible with God. But still very hard! Hard like it's hard to get that camel through the eye of a needle. The great English writer C. S. Lewis wrote these words---"It is conceivable that it would be possible to get a camel through the eye of a needle. But even though it is possible, it will be very rough on the camel!" (Quoted in Pastor, William Willimon, Abingdon Press, 2000, p. 297.

So it's possible with God, but still very hard. Hard on the camels, namely *us*.

Perhaps many of us react to all this in the following way-----"Okay, but none of this is relevant to me, because I'm not rich!" But if we compare ourselves to the world as a whole, almost all of us really are quite rich. Not all---in our parish our good pantry does get used. But the vast majority of us are pretty well off. Sure, it can be hard to pay the

bills, but look at the nice lifestyle those bills bring us.

Honestly, we live pretty comfortably---drivable cars, nice houses, good clothes, etc. The quickest way to realize this fact is to think about food (something I think about way too much!). In much of the world, the problem with food is that there is not enough. For us, the problem with food is that there is too much. Many of us get unhealthy not because of lack of food but because of excess of food. That shows we're well off.

I guarantee that if you visit Haiti, you won't see people spending any time discussing what diet to go on! They're too busy trying to come up with enough food to keep their children alive. So, for the most part, we're pretty rich.

And that is a big problem according to today's gospel reading. If we are rich, how are we going to make it to heaven? How get that camel through the eye of the needle? With God, all things are possible. Thanks be to God! But we have to cooperate with God for it to happen----we need to be cooperative camels.

How? Partly, by living by the biblical principle of stewardship. Stewardship is a principle taught to us throughout the Bible. What we own? We don't really own it. It's all God's and He loans it to us. He gives it to us temporarily so we can be good stewards of it, use it well for Him.

That means whatever we have, we need to hold on to it *loosely*. Not tightly---that was the problem of the rich young ruler in our gospel lesson. He held on tightly to all God had allowed him to have----so tightly that it caused him to walk away from Jesus.

So what we have comes from God and belongs to Him. We shouldn't get too attached to it, but instead use it for the Lord.

Every fall we have a stewardship campaign and it will be time for that again pretty soon. I guess this sermon today is actually part of that, just a bit ahead of time.

Part of stewardship has to do with our supporting God's work in our own parish----and you'll hear more about that this fall. But another big part of stewardship is helping the needy---and you're hearing about that today.

Helping the poor is a big part of good stewardship. In today's gospel, we learned how hard it is for the wealthy to be saved. So how does Christ direct the rich young man to get saved? By giving to the poor. As we just saw, compared to much of the world, we're pretty well off. So if we wish to be saved----well, there are many things involved here, primarily the grace of God. But Christ clearly says in today's gospel that helping the poor is part of the picture.

There are many ways to help the poor. *Many ways even in our own parish's ministries. Here's a list----*

---Our meal serving at St. Herman's Orthodox Homeless Shelter.

----Our street delivery ministry to the homeless. We have two ways of doing this now----- monthly delivery of sandwiches, blankets, clothes, etc. And then once every few months, a really huge delivery of hundreds of sandwiches and much clothing.

---Our parish food pantry

----Our Shoeboxes For Kids to get school supplies and little goodies to inner city children

----Our Christmas gifts for kids ministry.

And then beyond our parish, other ways to help the needy through Orthodox ministries:

- FOCUS, the pan-Orthodox domestic charity agency (who operate St. Herman's).
- the St. Mary of Egypt food distribution center in Cleveland.
- Zoe For Life, which aids those involved in difficult pregnancy situations
- International Orthodox Christian Charities which helps the poor around the world.

And, of course, there are many ways to help the needy outside of the structure of the Church: Maybe through some agency or charity or another, maybe a neighbor or fellow parishioner in a pinch (if you wish to help a parishioner anonymously, let me know....); or maybe a beggar on a freeway ramp, which seems to be their most common location lately.

No shortage of ways to help the needy!

Perhaps some may respond, "But what I have is mine! I earned it!" But it's not really yours---it's God's. And He wants you to give some of it to the poor. St. Basil, one of our very greatest Saints, said it well about what really belongs to whom---"The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry. The coat hanging unused in your closet belongs to the person who needs it. The money you store up in the bank belongs to the poor." (in The Message of the Sunday Gospels, Vol. I, Fr. Anthony Coniaris, Light & Life, p. 59) It is the poor's because it is Christ's-----and He comes to us in the poor.

There is an old Greek legend about a woman who prayed a lot-----always talking to the Lord. And one day she asked Jesus if He would come visit her at her house some day. He answered! And He said He would stop by the very next day. So the next morning she was in a tizzy, cleaning and cooking and getting everything ready for the Lord Himself to visit. In the midst of all her preparations, there was a knock on the door. She went to answer and was very disappointed to see there an old, crippled beggar. He said to her, "Could you please give me a little food? I am so hungry!" She became very upset and yelled at him, "I don't want you here! I am expecting a very important guest and have no time for you! No, no food for you---get out of here!" And in her rage, she even slapped the old fellow. He walked away. Well, the rest of the day went by and no one else came to the door. That night, she prayed and was upset with the Lord. She said to Him,"Lord, you never came to my house today like you promised you would!" And Christ answered her saying, "Yes, I did come to your house. And you refused to give me bread, you yelled at me, and you even slapped me!" And the woman realized the Lord had kept His word---He had come to visit her in the form of the beggar. (Juliet De Bonlay, Cosmos, Life, & Liturgy in a Greek Orthodox Village, Denise Harvey Publications, 2009, p. 359)

Perhaps a legend, but Christ really does come to us in the poor. If you're not sure about that go home and read what Christ said about Judgment Day in Matthew 25. No doubt, clear as a bell in the Lord's own words----when we feed the hungry, we are feeding Jesus.

Yes, when we help the poor, we are helping their special friend, Jesus Christ. And we are helping ourselves, too. For we are making the eye of the needle a little bigger so we, who are the camels, can with God's help squeeze through to heaven on the other side.

We are pretty well off. And that means it will be hard for us to be saved. But with God, anything is possible. So let us cooperate with God's saving of our souls by being good stewards of the wealth He has loaned us. And a main way of being a good steward is to give generously to the poor. May God bless us as we do so!

