

Pentecost 20 B Mark 10:17-31 “Through the eye of the needle” 10.10.21

+ Grace, mercy and peace are yours, from God our creator, and from our Lord and savior, Jesus, the Christ. **What’s in your wallet?** Today’s gospel breaks open idols, wealth, worldly power, to reveal the power of God.

When we were growing up, money was very tight. I recall a time that there was a company party that my parents attended, and Mom brought back some food from the party so that we could try it. With great fanfare and excitement, she placed a small bit on few plates for us. She said, “This is very fine! It’s lobster bisque. Only rich people eat lobster. I wanted you to try some, because we could never afford it.” My twin brother took a bite, made a horrified face, and ran to the garbage can to spit it out. Then he said, “Man, I’m glad that we’re not rich!”

One might have the same reaction in hearing today’s Gospel. Jesus’ words, “it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven” – you might think: Whew! Glad I’m not rich; this doesn’t apply to me!” But by worldly standards, just about everyone in this room qualifies as wealthy! So hang on, as we listen for God’s word made flesh.

In the beloved and well-known musical, “Fiddler on the Roof”— a musical number composed by Chaim Topol: “If I were a rich man” helps us to understand today’s text. The penultimate verse switches from the minor to major key, and musically, can be seen as the climax. It goes like this:

*If I were rich, I’d have the time that I lack to sit in the synagogue and pray  
And maybe have a seat by the Eastern wall!  
And I’d discuss the holy books with the learned men, several hours every day  
And that would be the sweetest thing of all...*

In Ancient Palestine, as, one might argue, is still true today, wealth and material possessions were seen a blessing from God. Wealthy people were seen as being closer to God. “Wouldn’t have to work hard!” -- with time on their hands to do “holy things!” And all the many possessions of the wealthy were thought to be signs or proof of God’s grace and love! Jesus dismantles this idol in our text today. **Throughout Mark’s Gospel**, Jesus battles demons and dismantles idols. You may

recall that Jesus' first encounter in Mark's Gospel is with Satan, and the first to recognize who Jesus is are demons; this gives us a clue of what is to come.

In today's text, **Jesus' encounter with the rich man is compelling**. The rich man's sincerity is clear; he wants to do the right thing. He wants a checklist to make sure that he is covering all the bases. Jesus says that he lacks one thing. What is that one thing? Could it be the ability to give, to let go? It seems that his riches and possessions have come to possess him—they have become his idol.

**Jesus looks upon this rich man and loved him**; the Greek word for looking used here is that Jesus, looking deeply into him, loved him. Jesus' remarks, then, are not said as criticism, scorn, or as rejection. Jesus lovingly invites the rich man to go, let go by selling everything, give the money to the poor, then come follow Jesus. The man's many possessions have come to possess him. He can't let go.

Jesus then uses this as a teaching moment with the disciples. **Looking around** at them, Jesus shatters the popular myth that the rich are somehow closer to God and a shew-in for Heaven. Jesus shocks the disciples by saying that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus dismantles the idol of wealth = God's blessings.

So much **looking** is going on in this text! Jesus looks deeply at/ into the rich man and loves him; he looks around at his disciples as he loves and teaches them. The eye of the needle, on the other hand, though it's an eye, it sees nothing. **What are we not seeing in our own lives**—where are we "stuck" or unable to let go? Jesus calls us out, in love, for that which possesses us: our idols; Jesus calls us to look at our own lives and the degree to which money and possessions possess us all.

**The word miser shares its root with the word miserable**— one who is unable to let go, to give, to love, to trust. Miser and miserable are two sides of the same coin, (pun intended) for if we cannot give, we cannot love, trust and enter fully into who God is calling us to be. **Misers are, by definition, miserable**. Wealth and possessions can come to possess us. Who can be saved? Have any of us kept all the commandments since our youth. The human answer is no. The prophet Amos ups the ante: we are complicit in a system that tramples on the poor and turns justice to poison—the meaning of wormwood that we discovered this week in our bible study. Amos condemns those who turn a blind eye to injustice.

What we do with our earthly wallet: our money, belongings, worldly possessions, matters. Generosity matters. From that very beloved text in John's gospel: *God so loved that world that he gave....* Loving and giving are inextricably linked in our life, walk with God and spirituality.

Martin Luther wrote that there are **three conversions** each believer needs to experience: The conversion of the head; the conversion of the heart; and finally, the conversion of the wallet, purse or pocketbook. Are we able to let go?

What's in your wallet? Who can be saved? It is not humanly possible. But for God, all things are possible. **Though our Baptism into Christ, we have passed through the eye of the needle. We come before God in the Risen Christ and instead of condemnation find love, mercy and grace.**

God's word made flesh, continues to look upon us deeply, with love, knowing how often we fail and fall short. Christ continues to call, exhort and expect those in the beloved community to love, to give, to work for justice in the world.

We don't need a spiritual wallet—thanks be to God that all our debts have been paid by Jesus. Salvation is not for sale. We cannot earn, buy or barter our salvation; this is a free gift in Jesus. What we call our possessions—cannot possess us; what we give to God already belongs to God!

In the community of believers, gathered into Christ by God's Holy Spirit, we are astounded to find that we, ourselves, now have passed **through of the eye of the needle**. In this global community of faith, we find that we now have 100-fold brothers and sisters, mothers, children and 100-fold houses, fields and friends.

Today we welcome one of these new siblings in Christ into the mission/ ministry we share in Christ Jesus. Vicar Cate, there are times when you will wonder why in the world you were sent here! There are times when your courage, creativity and energy may not seem up to the task. People of God, let us hold our Vicar and each other in prayer to remind ourselves, that **with God, all things are possible**.

We rejoice that God, the Bishop's office, seminary and others have brought Vicar Cate to serve among us. As we welcome Christ's own presence, we are joyful to welcome Vicar Cate to our family of faith, to labor together in God's vineyard. Vicar Cate, we are blessed to welcome you in Jesus' holy name. Thanks be to God!