

Job 23: 1-9, 16-17
Psalm 22: 1-15
Hebrews 4: 12-16
Mark 10: 17-31

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Proper 23, Year B

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart, be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

In our very challenging text, Jesus uses the metaphor of the camel passing through the eye of a needle as the definition of impossibility when the rich man asks Jesus about how he can inherit eternity. Inherit is an interesting word, since we never know how the man became so wealthy. Did he inherit his riches? Did he feel entitled? We never know.

And it's the impossibility of this text which makes it uncomfortable for us. Neither you nor I is going to walk away from our lives and give away our money to inherit eternal life which is what's implied here.

My challenge then is to suggest an idea or two that might help us reimagine it.

Maybe this goes without saying, but a point worth making at the outset is that Jesus is not for sale.

How helpful might it have been for his fledgling ministry to have a small endowment? Churches worry about this all the time. Jesus might have created a base of operations, a place to worship, regroup, plan, but that didn't happen. That didn't seem to matter at all to him.

Something else that struck me: in dutifully keeping the commandments, the wealthy man was already assured of a place in heaven. What was he really seeking? What did Jesus think he was missing? Again, we don't know because Jesus was both direct and enigmatic.

But here's a new idea: The wealthy man gives up and walks away immediately. What if he asked Jesus to help him figure out how to do it? To help open his heart?

Had he missed the point that while Jesus said it would be impossible for a human, it was not for God? There is hope in this story but the wealthy man missed it. What if he had asked a follow-up question or began praying to God to show him how to start? What was supposed to be easy turned out to be hard and he gave up.

I've always wondered about the people who turned and walked away from Jesus. The fishermen who stayed in their boats, the tax collectors at their desks. Here is someone who walked away. And yet, Mark tells us, Jesus loved him. This was not a "Get behind me Satan moment." Could the rich man not see or feel Jesus' love? Or was he too blinded by his wealth and possession to really see?

One of the reasons this text makes us feel so bracingly uncomfortable is that even though we may not think of ourselves as rich, most of us are, at least by the definition that says “Rich is anyone afraid of losing what they have.” So that may make you, as it did me, think a little differently. I’m sure most of you have heard the statistic that 2.6 billion people in the world live on less than two dollars a day. The camel passing through the eye of the needle might seem like very good news to them.

Wealth, in the ancient world was seen as a sign of God’s favor, which is one of the ways Jesus upended the existing order by reaching out to include everyone - no exceptions -

So then what was Jesus really up to here?

Barbara Brown Taylor, author and theologian, suggests it was a dare:

It is a dare to him [the rich man] to become a new creature, defined in a new way, to trade in all the words that have described him up to now – wealthy, committed, cultured, responsible, educated, powerful, obedient – to trade them all in on one radically different word which is free.”

Free. There’s a word I never thought of in the context of this scripture. Never in Matthew, Mark or Luke, the three gospels in which it appears. Which opens up this text for me in a new way. Is it wealth that holds the rich man back? Greed? A shuttered heart? Is it a lack of understanding that while our eyes can’t see beyond the horizon, the obvious, God’s eyes can. That’s where my trust needs to be, that God waits for me in a place beyond imagining, and Jesus is pointing the way.

While I am routinely frustrated by the enigmatic Jesus, I realize that mystery is one of the gospels great gifts. Mystery makes it possible to take these stories into our own time into our own lives, and see them in new ways that make us go deeper instead of shrugging them off too vexing or too hard.

Here’s a story that took me into the heart of this text and I hope it will for you, too. I don’t know the original source but it suggests to me what Jesus was looking for in the rich man but didn’t find.

It’s the story of a young disciple in India who left home and traveled in search of a spiritual master whom he at last found sitting in prayer beside a river.

The young man begged the master to teach him. The master rose slowly, then suddenly grabbed the younger man and dragged him into the river and under the water. Seconds passed, then a minute, then another minute. The young man struggled and kicked, but still the teacher held him down until at last he drew him coughing and gasping out of the water.

While you were under the water, what was it you wanted?” the teacher asked, when he saw that the other was finally able to speak again. “Air,” the young man said, still

panting. “And how badly did you want it?” “All...it was all I wanted in the world. With my whole soul I longed only for air.”

“Good,” said the teacher. “When you long for God in the same way that you have just now longed for air, come back to me and you will become my disciple.”

Dear God may you be the air we yearn to breath. AMEN

Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Opposite of Rich” from *The Preaching Life*, Cowley Publications: Cambridge, MA (1993), p124.