

28th Sunday of Ordinary Time “The Eye of the Needle”

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My friends, every so often someone raises the concern with me that they can't find any instance in the Gospels of Jesus smiling, laughing or telling a joke. Each time this concern is voiced, I reassure them that there are several moments in the Gospels that are intentionally laugh out loud funny if you know how to interpret what is going on. In today's Gospel reading, we have such a moment.

Jesus says, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." This is funny, if you know what Jesus is referring to when he speaks of the needle's eye. When I was last in the Holy Land, our group went to Masada where our tour guide pointed out in the ruins the architectural significance of this. You see, to make sure the people entering your fort were easy to inspect before passing inside, they had the entrance designed so that you had two large walls on both sides of the road coming together to make a holding area with a small entryway. Our tour guide said that this small door was called the eye of the needle, a place where people could only enter one at a time. This made inspections easier and kept the city safe from invasion, especially after hours. Because the entry here is quite small, a camel would be a tight squeeze.

You see, Jesus is telling his disciples that it is easier for a camel to get through an eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven because the rich man is fatter than the camel. Get it? It might be hard for us to get this joke, but the people living at this time might have been rolling on the floor laughing. It's funny. The disciples knew however that even Jesus' jokes had a deeper significant meaning so they reasonably ask the question, "who then can be saved?" Jesus reassures them, probably still laughing when he said it, "This is impossible for human beings but not for God. All things are possible for God."

For God, all things are possible. However, the worldly attachments we accumulate through life do have a way of weighing us down. I suppose that an equivalent for today could be reflected by the following parable. There once was a man whom God promised that he could take one suitcase with him to heaven when he died. So, in his will, he had a suitcase full of gold placed next to his hospital bed. When he passed during the night, because God made that promise, an angel lugged that suitcase to the pearly gates with one hand and the soul of the deceased man in the other. St. Peter looked at the man the angel brought and then the suitcase filled with gold, scratched his head, and says, "Oh great, more pavement". There is a spiritual truth in today's Gospel reading. What we value here on earth could at times be quite worthless in heaven. Or said in another way, if we can't empty our cup of earthly attachments, God can't fill something that is already full.

And so, let's talk about the rich man in today's Gospel. The rich man approached Jesus and asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answered, "Follow the commandments." The rich man responds, "I have followed all the commandments since my youth, there must be something more?" The Gospel says Jesus looked at him and loved him, like a teacher who loves the student who cares less about what must be minimally accomplished to pass the grade and who rather wishes to obtain wisdom for wisdom's sake alone. Jesus doesn't disappoint, "You lack one thing", Jesus says, "Go sell everything you have. Give to the poor and follow me." The rich man went away sad because the homework assignment involved a huge sacrifice.

Now, does Jesus sometimes ask disciples to literally sell everything, give to the poor and to follow him? Yes. Ask St. Vincent de Paul or Mother Teresa about that! For the rest of us, I believe this is more of a spiritual challenge to consider the questions, "what possessions do I own?" and "what possessions own me?" What was limiting the rich man's spiritual growth, in Jesus' estimation, was his inordinate attachment to his earthly possessions. He needed to empty his cup before Jesus could fill it. This is why the rich man walked away sad. We can ask ourselves: do we have inordinate attachments to earthly passions or possessions that are limiting our spiritual growth, keeping us from following Jesus more closely? What are they? These are healthy questions from our Gospel reading for us to contemplate.

The good news of the Gospel reading is that the rich man's salvation was not in jeopardy. He followed the ten commandments after all...and all things are possible for God for those who are sincere about living a good life. What the rich man wanted however was a higher bar to follow, and Jesus sure gave him one. If Jesus gave you a higher bar to follow this week, what would it be? This coming week can we all spend some time with Jesus and ask these questions of ourselves, what are the attachments, addictions and desires I need to leave behind so to pass through the eye of the needle? When you stop to think about it, what lies beyond the eye of the needle could very well be salvation itself! What do I need to empty from my cup so that Jesus can fill it anew? In the moments we find ourselves tempted to give up or walk away sad, we are encouraged that what we think is impossible for us in life is never impossible for God. For God, all things are possible through Christ our Lord. Amen.