

Doorways
“The Camel at the Door”
The United Church of Gainesville
April 6, 2008
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Mark 10:17-27

Every spring Sandy, Andy, and I go off for a day long retreat where we brainstorm ideas for themes for the coming year. We thought of “Doorways” as a good theme for spring. They suggest the passages and changes we go through in spring, as well as a spirit of openness and welcome. Mike Myers said he could get doors for us to hang up front. Then I thought of inviting church members to paint the doors with symbols of the theme. The result is these inspiring doors in the front of the church.

Throughout this spring these doors will challenge us to consider all manner of faith questions about doorways. Most of what we will talk about during involves going through those doorways that lie ahead in our lives, with open minds and courage. This is what’s described in all the quotes at the top of the bulletin, except the last one, which is Winnie the Pooh’s warning not to eat so much once you have passed through a doorway that you can’t squeeze back out. Just file that one away for later.

For some reason, my first thought about doors was camels. There is an Arab saying that became popular in the English speaking world in the 1850’s, “Never let a camel push its nose into your tent, or soon you will find the whole camel in your tent, and you will be on the outside looking in.” How many of you have heard that?

This camel quote is meant to be a reminder that bad habits are a slippery slope, as in “Oh we’ll just let the dog sleep in our bed just once.” It’s good to remember the camel in the tent story any time you find yourself uttering a statement that includes “Just one time can’t hurt” – as in just one cigarette, just one extra shot of vodka to help me sleep, or just one off-hand brush with some casual extra marital sex can’t hurt. Beware any phrase that begins with “Just once...” Just is a deceptive adverb.

So that’s one image of a camel and a doorway. There’s another one, that’s much more complex and difficult. It’s Jesus’ statement that it’s easier to for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

Note that this statement follows a conversation with a rich young man who asks Jesus about eternal life. Jesus asks him if he keeps the commandments, and reels off a few examples. The young man says he does keep these. Note this interesting phrase, in the middle of the story. “Jesus, looking at him loved him.” So Jesus takes it a step further, “How about selling your stuff, give to the poor and follow me?” In other words,

go through a new door. And the man went away quite sad, because, evidently, he was attached to a lot of stuff.

Then Jesus makes his famous camel and the eye of a needle statement to his disciples. And what's interesting is that the disciples don't say, "Yeah, those rich fat cats don't deserve to get their camel's nose into heaven's tent." No, the disciples who have already left quite a lot behind to follow Jesus ask, "Who then can be saved?" The disciples don't exclude themselves from a certain attachment to wealth.

The story of the camel and the eye of a needle has bothered people ever since it was first spoken. And to make matters worse, it looks like Jesus really said it. It probably was not added in later by the gospel writer, or the church. It's in Matthew, Mark, and Luke in the exact same form. And the fact that we always work so hard to soften its blow indicates that no one in their right mind would make it up.

There are two popular interpretations of this passage. One is that there was a gate in Jerusalem, that was used at night when the main gates were closed, called the "needle's eye." The only way a camel could get through this gate was if all the baggage it was carrying was removed, and it got down on its knees.

How many of you have heard this?

The great thing about the story of the needle's eye as a city gate is that it indicates that rich people can get into heaven the same way a camel could get into the heavenly city of Jerusalem, by letting go of our baggage and kneeling in humility.

The assumption that goes with this is that like the camel, we could load back up again once we're inside.

There's even an animal nativity pageant at the Oakwood Pond Assembly of God mega church that includes a reenactment of a camel successfully going through a simulated Needle's Eye gate. The classic religious humor journal "The Wittenburg Door" reports that Jonathan Godfrey, a major benefactor of this drama, applauded the re enactment. To him it meant that he didn't have to be guilt tripped by organizations soliciting money for and I quote, "poor people who insist on remaining poor." Another observer said, "It was awesome, God so loved the world and all its material blessings that he gave His only son so that a rich man could indeed enter the kingdom of heaven, no matter how difficult it might seem... I mean, we shouldn't be selfish or anything, but it's nice to know it doesn't matter if we are."

There are two great things we can learn from this Oak Pond Church re enactment. First, in spite of the fact that this interpretation of the Needle's Eye gate has been used as far back as the fifteenth century, it's not likely that such a named gate ever existed. An article from the institute for Hebrew New Testament Studies notes, "It's a lovely story... however, there is no evidence for such a gate, nor a record of a reprimand for the architect who had forgotten to make a gate big enough for the camel and rider to pass through unhindered."

Or here's another attempt to soften the blow. Many scholars have pointed out that that this could be a Greek misprint, for the Greek word "kamilos" which means camel could have been "kamelos" which means a cable type rope. These folks uncovered the idea that there were needles with six inch eyes for making carpets that this rope could go through, even if with some difficulty.

Unfortunately, none of these, not the Needle's Eye gate nor the mistaking of a camel for a rope in Greek works. There's no Needle's eye gate, and the Greek word was "camel."

Remember again, Jesus was a Jew and used a Jewish way of speaking. This story is a classic form of exaggeration to get attention. There was a phrase in the Talmud describing the impossible by saying, "That's like an elephant going through an eye of a needle."

One writer says that this is a classic example of Jesus as a Jewish comic: "Rich people getting into the Kingdom of God? Yeah that will happen when pigs fly." (And then some scholars would speculate that on an obscure island there was once a "pigbird" that flew only in the season when it abandoned its nest..")

In Israel, a camel was the largest animal regularly seen. So this was the example Jesus gave.

Now we have quite a difficulty here. There was a tradition, as there is today, that wealth and prosperity were a sign of God's blessing. Wealthy people, ourselves included, often thank God for our well being. People hearing these words of Jesus about the camel would be rather stunned to hear that wealth wasn't an automatic sign of God's blessings. Again, even the disciples are astounded, asking "Who then can be saved?"

Jesus is speaking to a people who are locked in oppressive poverty by a Roman Empire that is taxing them beyond their ability to survive, taxing them not for social services, schools, and medical care, but instead for the excesses of the Roman Empire. Jesus clearly tells people that being poor doesn't mean that God doesn't bless you. In the beatitudes, he says, "Blessed are you who are poor. The kingdom of heaven is yours."

But Jesus doesn't romanticize poverty. Nor does he want people to be poor. So how does this work?

Let me give three examples. Again, without romanticizing poverty, for nobody wants to be poor, I think of our custodian Ken Bradley.

Consider his environmental impact upon the earth. He doesn't own a car. Every morning he leaves his home in Grove Park, just this side of Hawthorne, and starts walking down Rt. 20 to Gainesville. Somebody who knows him from Hawthorne always picks him up. He keeps a bicycle locked at a friend's house down on East University Ave and rides it the rest of the way to church. He reverses this process every day on the way home.

He lives in a small house he built right by the Gainesville - Hawthorne bike trail. He's got a little space heater he fires up when it gets very cold. He's got a small window A/C unit he hardly ever uses. He lives surrounded by family and friends in his community. His carbon footprint is small and light. His connection to people near and dear to him is large and strong.

Wealth in and of itself is not evil. The problem I believe is how easily we become attached to it and how easily it overtakes our better nature.

My second point is about the Kingdom of God. We often think that this means a reward in heaven. It could better be translated as God's realm, or God's domain. It's a quality of life right here and now, and being saved means being healed and whole. There is a way of living that is loving, challenging, fulfilling, connected, exciting. And going through the door to find that quality is easily hindered by an enslavement to wealth. No matter how noble our jobs, we tend to work too hard and too long, missing the true quality of life. I don't need to give you a list of electronics and other luxuries that not only pollute the planet but which also separate us from God's green earth and each other. Wealth blocking the realm of God is a natural cause and effect process.

The New Yorker has a regular series of cartoons by William Hamilton about rich folks at their clubs, parties, or offices making comments like, "I've tried a lot of life strategies, and being completely self-serving works best for me." Or "It's not just the church that needs evangelists. So does big oil." Or a secretary reminding the high powered exec behind his desk, "Oh, and your feelings have been trying to get in touch with you." Or a management meeting breaking up with the boss saying to his staff, "Okay, let's go out and earn 400 times our workers' salaries." The material is endless.

It's not that we don't do good things with our money. And it's not that Jesus wants us to be poor. But things can happen to us passing through the door to success like Winnie the Pooh describes in that quote at the top of the bulletin. "*When having a smackerel of something with a friend, don't eat so much that you get stuck in the doorway trying to get out.*"

Most of us, after we reach a certain point of comfort in life, love to talk about our early days when we were students, or just starting out in business, and didn't have much money. I do it about Divinity School. My parents did it talking about the depression. And when we try to recover the meaning of those early days, we often get stuck, like Winnie the Pooh, in the door we once easily passed through.

And then the third point. It seems that sermons must have three points. Jesus has given us something impossible, which Jesus loves to do. His parables are not typically about common sense but surprises, paradoxes, or opposites that can't be humanly resolved.

The disciples, having had enough of such extreme language, say, “Who then can be saved?” And Jesus says, “With humans, it’s impossible. With God all things are possible.”

I believe we need to recognize how our good fortune, our stuff, latches onto our soul and sucks the life out of it. It’s virtually impossible for us to escape the material seductions of fortune. But notice that what upsets Jesus about the rich man who walked away, the rich guy whom Jesus really liked, was that the rich man couldn’t follow. He couldn’t go through a new door. He couldn’t, in the words of our Easter sermon, leave his small boat. His problem was wealth, and while we could substitute many other things that block us from the realm of God, we too can’t side step the way our possessions, our attachments, our addictions to things block us from going through the door to a deeper more caring life. Sure we do good things for ourselves, our children, and the world with our money. But our concern, worry, and even lust things also keeps stuck. So the main thing to remember from point three is that Jesus calls us to simply admit this. Admit that we can’t save ourselves from being entrapped by our things. Admit that we need a power greater than ourselves to be free. Through opening ourselves up to whatever name we want to give to God, whether we call ourselves Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, or seekers, by opening ourselves to a higher or deeper power we can indeed pass through impossible yet beautiful doors to a more giving, loving, caring life. We get stuck on money, and can’t get unstuck. But by the grace of God miracles do happen, and one of those miracles is asking for God’s help, getting unstuck, and finding a new doorway to heaven, God’s domain, right here on earth.

Prayer – I invite you into a time of meditation and prayer. If it is helpful for you, fix your attention on one of the doors, whichever one strikes you. Or you may want to look at the front door of the Sanctuary or to look outside, or close your eyes.

Breathe in and out slowly Relax Bring your attention to your breath.

Think of a doorway that lies ahead of you in your life – a threshold – an opening that can lead to a new chapter, a deeper relationship, a meaningful part of life that you have longed for, a hoped-for change that you dream of. Imagine what life is like on the other side of that doorway, the very best possible scenario you can imagine.

See yourself walking toward that doorway – that opening – and notice what immediately holds you back, what blocks you from walking through that doorway.

Open yourself to pray now for insight about that which blocks you. Pray for the wisdom and courage to find ways to deal with what holds you back, both externally and internally.

Let the blessing of God, who always loves you, accompany you through this door. See yourself, see this path opening before you, bathed in light and grace.

Breathe deeply – in and out – breathe God’s light and grace into your heart and your soul and your body – and as I ring the bell, bring your focus back to this place.