

Last week, we heard what I think are Jesus' most difficult words to understand, and I told you that I don't understand them either. I've resolved that's OK. We don't have to understand everything Jesus said to know that his heart is a heart of grace. We know enough about him to know that the gospel is good news for everyone, or it is good news for no one. Unlike last week's passage, the problem with Jesus' words today are not that they are too hard to understand, but too easy. "You are lacking one thing. Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me." Reading this reminds me of Mark Twain who said, "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand." The problem with this story is not that Jesus is unclear about what he means. He's crystal clear, but I just don't want to hear it. And I'm not alone in not wanting to hear it. There have been many attempts over the years to find an escape clause from this command.

How many of you have heard that there was once a narrow gate in the walls of Jerusalem called, "The Eye of the Needle," and the only way for a person on a camel to enter this gate was if the camel bowed on its knees? Has anyone heard that before? This interpretation lessens the blow as if Jesus is saying, "It's tough to enter the kingdom if you're wealthy, but not impossible." Here's the problem though, there was never a gate called the Eye of the Needle. A monk invented this story a thousand years ago, and it's been repeated ever since. There's no getting around it. In this metaphor, Jesus meant a camel, which was the largest animal in the region, and a needle was the smallest aperture. The problem is that he meant what he said.

The other way people try to wriggle out of this passage is the more tempting path for me. It's what I call the Protestant path. As a good Protestant, this path makes perfect sense to me, but I think it fails as well. It goes like this: A man approaches Jesus as he's traveling to Jerusalem, where he will suffer and be crucified. The man kneels before Jesus and says, "Good Teacher, what must I do to obtain eternal life?" Now, as a Protestant who believes that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, we can hear this man's question and say, "Aha! This man's problem is that he thinks salvation is something to be earned by his good deeds, but as Protestants we know there's nothing we can do to earn our salvation. It's a gift we receive by faith. So long as we remember we are saved by faith, not by works, then we don't need to worry about selling our possessions and giving our money to the poor. This man's problem wasn't really a money problem, but a theology problem. Therefore, for us wealthy Christians in 2021, as long as we have our theology straight, we don't need to worry about our wealth. Doesn't that sound nice? It really does. It's a lovely end around that frees us from Jesus' command, but I just don't buy it. I think Jesus meant what he said.

Notice I said, for us wealthy Christians, because I count myself amongst the wealthy. Living in Dublin, I could easily make a case that compared to most of my neighbors, I'm not very wealthy. We live in a modest 2-bedroom home that shares a wall with our neighbors, so I must be exempt from Jesus' command. He is talking to other people, maybe some of you, but certainly not me. So that's a relief, for me. But the deeper I gaze into this story, the more I think that none of us are exempt from Jesus' command.

We live in the wealthiest nation the world has ever known, and while the gap between the rich and the poor is both widening and troubling, I can say for my part, I've never wondered where my next meal was coming from. Not once. I've never worried about where I would sleep

at night, or if I'd have heat during the winter. I've never avoided medical or dental treatment for lack of insurance. The list could go on. Though I'm sure some of you have known poverty and want in your life, we are a highly privileged people, who by worldly and historical standards are wealthy. We cannot exempt ourselves from Jesus' command. In fact, I've been thinking about the wealthy man in this story as America—what must I do to obtain eternal life Jesus? I've kept the commandments. Jesus looks at us like Columbo and says, "Just one more thing. Sell all your possessions. Give the money to the poor, and come follow me." It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.

So, what are we to make of this passage? Is Jesus simply against anti-wealth and possessions? And what good would it do for this man to sell everything he had? One thing that's often overlooked in this passage is when Jesus lists the commandments, he begins with the 10 commandments, but inserts one that's not on the list. Our translation says, "Don't cheat." Others say, "Don't defraud." That word, "defraud" is a reference to Deuteronomy 24 which says, "Do not take advantage of poor and needy workers, whether they are fellow Israelites or immigrants in the land." Jesus is referencing economic exploitation, where wealth is acquired at the expense of the most vulnerable. And while this man claims he's never done that, I think the implication is that he has, whether he knows it or not.

You see, wealth in the first century was largely built by underpaying the poorest people and passing on inheritance on for generations. Not very different that today, is it? Like this man, most of us look at what we have and say, I've worked hard for this. While we may not be as brazen as this guy is to say, "I've kept all God's commandments from my youth," nonetheless, we both overestimate our own righteousness and underestimate the ways we've taken part in systems that exploit the poor and the immigrant. And Jesus wants to free this man and free all of us from systems of exploitation, that we might finally be free to follow him on the path to eternal life. Jesus invites him to make amends for the ways he's defrauded the poor. It's not an onerous demand but an invitation to be free. This man, like so many of us, like me, has a really hard time trusting that following Jesus is worth more than my mutual funds. I'm happy to call Jesus a good teacher, and even bow before him, but giving up my money? That's a step too far.

Now, wealth is not in itself evil, but it sure has a way of getting inside our hearts and becoming our source of security. It both deceives us into thinking we are more righteous than we are and distracts us from our own unrighteousness and all the ways our wealth has come at the expense of the poor. So, what are we to do? Should we all take out our phones, get on our banking and investment apps and divest our wealth and give it to the poor? You can if you want. We're still taking our Peace and Global Witness offering today. But before you do anything, there's one important part of this story that we haven't considered. After this guy claims, I've kept all God's commands since I was a child, Mark says this, "Jesus looked at him carefully and loved him." This is the only place in the entire Gospel of Mark where Jesus is said to love anyone. Of course, it's implied elsewhere, but this is the only time we hear directly that Jesus loves someone. It's not the leper he heals or the children he blesses, but this rich guy who arrogantly thinks his life is all together. Jesus looks carefully at him, sees through his delusions and defenses, and he loves him. That's this man's only hope, and it's our hope as well.

In the end, it's not our obedience that will save us. That's like trying to get a camel through a needle. What saves us is that even in our sin, we are still loved by Jesus. This one who was first gladly became last for our sakes, or as Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians, "You know the

grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Although he was rich, he became poor for your sakes, so that you could become rich through his poverty.” Whether you realize it or not, to be loved by God is worth more than anything you could ever own. And you are so loved by God, that God gave up everything, just to love you, and that is good news.