This is the 4th in our sermon series, trying to look at familiar Bible stories through the lens of the other character than the hero, or the protagonist. It would be fair to say that could be anybody but Jesus, in any story that includes him. Two characters in this story have made it one of the famous gospel lessons – the rich young man, and a fictional camel. The two saying that make it so, that everyone remembers, are these: 1) Go, sell all you have, give to the poor, and follow me, and 2) It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.

But first, let’s dispense with the camel. The church has tried for centuries to find a way to show that Jesus didn’t mean a real needle, or Jesus didn’t mean a real camel, or Jesus wasn’t talking to us. One story I heard myself, years ago, was that in those days there was a small gate in the walled city of Jerusalem, smaller than the others, called the “eye of the needle” which a camel could go through on its knees. Except there never was, say every archaeologist and New Testament scholar, and this explanation only appeared in the Middle Ages, 9th century. Another was that since the words rope and camel, in Hebrew, are only one letter different, and since you could get thread a rope through a needle if it was a very small rope and a very large needle…. Yeah, I’d like to see that. Another idea was that Jesus only meant this as a lesson for the disciples, not for the rest of us. Nice try.

I do like professor Crossan’s idea that there is a “certain saving grace in the camel aphorism…a certain lack of venom and vengeance against the rich.” Getting a camel through the eye of a needle is funny, and Jesus seems light-hearted in his explanation, less angry or judgmental than simply observant. In the same way Buechner rephrases that it is “harder for a rich person to enter paradise than for a Mercedes to get through a revolving door.”

So much for the camel. Now to our “rich young man,” whom tradition calls the “rich young ruler.” This story appears in Matthew, Mark and Luke (what we call the “synoptic” gospels – meaning they tell the story from the same general viewpoint; John is very different). Mark just says he is a man. Luke calls him a ruler. Only Matthew says the man is young, a neaniskos, probably in his twenties.

Today we’re going with Matthew, and his young man with many possessions. The young man asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” That does NOT mean, “How do I get to heaven when I die?” We’re hung up on that idea, and it does not do justice to scripture. The kind of life in question is life in the grace and blessing of God. Bishop N.T. Wright translates the question this way: “How do I be among those vindicated, when God acts decisively and becomes king?” Jesus knew what he was asking, and said, “If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments (and cites some of them).” The young man was not satisfied, and answered, “I’ve kept all those since I was a child.” Some have challenged that self-assessment, wondering how, if he kept all the commandments, he has “clung to so much wealth in the face of his neighbor’s need?” I wonder how much of a challenge it was for a child not to commit adultery. John Calvin observed that the young man should have been humble, but was “intoxicated with foolish confidence” in his boasts. Jesus gave him the second reply only when he saw the young man was not satisfied with the first. If you wish to be perfect (that is telios, whole or complete), sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”
What must I do to have eternal life? The very question has two major things wrong with it. The first being to ask what he must do. As if eternal life were an accomplishment or even a possession. Did he want his next merit badge? Or his next acquisition? We will see in a moment, from Jesus’ answer to both the young man and the disciples, that eternal life is not an accomplishment but a surrender. But listen again to his question – what must I do? He asked an individual question, and Jesus gave him a communal answer, that turned his focus away from himself and toward others. Then he invited him into the community of disciples. Come, follow me.

When Jesus told the young man these things, the disciples were stunned. They would have been raised in traditional Jewish piety of the time, which said that wealth was a sign of blessing, of divine favor. We haven’t gotten far from that piety. The Puritans said the same thing, in our history. And Creflo Dollar is saying it over in Atlanta this morning. This particular heresy has been around a long time. But that is hard to find in the gospels, in Jesus’ words. Still, no wonder the disciples wondered, Then who can be saved?”

Christian tradition is filled with warnings about accumulation of things, of possessions, and the admonition that if have too many possessions we will be possessed by them. Here’s a sample:

- John Wesley: “…it is hard for the rich to be good Christians, since it becomes too easy for them to trust in their wealth and not in God.”
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “Earthly possessions dazzle and delude us into thinking they can provide security and freedom from anxiety. Yet all the time they are the very source of anxiety.”
- Hans Conzelmann: “Possessions are not forbidden, but Jesus shows their danger for the one possessing them.”
- William Cavanaugh: “Consumerism represents a constant dissatisfaction with particular material things themselves.”
- St. Augustine, in the 5th century: “Riches are gained with toil and kept with fear. They are enjoyed with danger and lost with grief. It is hard to be saved if we have them; and impossible if we love them; and scarcely can we have them but we shall love them inordinately. Teach us, O Lord, this difficult lesson: to manage with care the goods we possess.”

All true, to be sure. But here we are at the end of the sermon, and I haven’t done my character, the rich young man, any favors. We haven’t yet seen through his lenses, mainly because we don’t know what they are. All we know is his question was immature and impulsive, and that he went away grieving, for he had many possessions. I want to assume this – that he was not a jerk, but an over-earnest young fellow with potential. Here’s why: Jesus talked about him in terms of whimsical camels, and in Mark’s version of this story, the evangelist says, “Jesus looked on him and loved him.” I think Wesley states it most clearly, in the quotes I gave. The danger is that our attachment to possessions keeps us from a total dependence on God. Jesus told the young man to sell it all and give to the poor not because they need money (they do), but because he needed to be liberated from his belongings. He needed to learn surrender to all that is holy. Mark Powell writes that, “Jesus was not a fundraiser. He talked about money because he cared about us and because he knew that what we do with our money affects who we are spiritually.” And of course it affects others, too, as we learned from the Wall Street fiasco in 2007. We need be careful not to turn this passage into severe law. Jesus first cited the law to the young man, but then invited him into grace. Our salvation is not a result of our actions, but of God’s love. We are saved not because we are good, but because God is. The disciples asked, Then who can be saved? Jesus said, For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible. That is, who can be saved? Nobody. But everybody. We are utterly dependent on God.
So here is the question: What did the rich young man do? Christian tradition has assumed he went away sorrowful because he wasn’t going to do what Jesus asked him to do. But we don’t know that. What if he did? What if he got rid of the Tesla, gave the money to the YWCA and came back? I choose to think that’s what happened. For one thing, if he was not inclined to believe Jesus’ words, he would have dismissed them, rationalized it as religious quackery, indulged in some self-justification. For another, this passage follows immediately on the story where others tried to keep the children from bothering Jesus, and Jesus said, *Let the children come to me, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.* Then we immediately find this young man trying to find his way. He knew there was something he lacked, so he asked. He sensed that something was missing. Jesus pushed the boundaries of his thinking. Fr Richard Rohr observes that in the Beatitudes of Matthew 5, six times Jesus said to them, *The law says…but I say…,* and never did he throw out the Law but he pushed it further. Fr. Rohr bids us, “Ask yourself, “What is the message here for me? Why do I have difficulty with it?”

Confession – I read a dozen commentaries on the text and only one agrees with me, but one did, and isn’t it a better story that way? He went away grieving because he had many possessions. What if he was grieving because he was going to sell those possessions and give to the poor, and he knew it was going to be very hard to do? The first step is the hardest one, the most painful – apologizing to a friend, making major lifestyle changes, calling a psychologist or a counselor, visiting AA for the first time, confronting answering the call of God. The point is less that the wealthy have a serious impediment in this regard, but that we all do, even the poor who may sometimes define their value as persons by what they don’t have. The point is our utter dependence on God, that grace alone can help us, and that – in the end – we are called beloved children of God and so we are.

The beauty of this story is the ending is left to us. We may write the ending, perhaps the one we need ourselves to hear. I choose to believe the rich young man, let’s call him Silas, went away grieving because he was going to miss that 1936 Martin D-28 guitar. Then a week later he caught up with the disciples and their entourage, halfway to Jerusalem. Maybe Matthew himself was struggling with a pack, and Silas said, “Here, let me carry that.”

It could happen.

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