

Push That Camel!
Mark 10:23-31

A sermon by Meighan Pritchard
Prospect United Church of Christ
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Just before this passage, a rich man kneels at Jesus' feet and says, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (10:17)

I need a volunteer. You are my rich elderly spinster aunt. As you are heading out the door, I show up unannounced, fling myself at your feet, and say, "Oh most favored Aunt, what must I do to inherit your wealth?"

How does that feel, to hear those words? [Input: Disingenuous, manipulative, etc.] It's not authentic. It's like a checklist transaction, all about the money, nothing about the actual relationship.

If you were really determined to inherit her wealth, you could curry favor, or try to manipulate her, or rewrite her will when she's not looking. This is the stuff of murder mystery plots: elderly aunts, great wealth, wills. It all sounds very Agatha Christie. But short of foul play, there isn't a whole lot you can do to *make* the elderly aunt leave you all her money. If you come out and suggest it, you look pretty crass.

But then there are opportunities for genuine relationships. Maybe you truly love your aunt, truly want to spend time with her, make sure she's okay, learn more about her. She may or may not leave you all her wealth—that's up to her, not you—but that's no longer even the point. The relationship is the point.

I once worked as the office manager for an environmental nonprofit. It was my job to open the mail of the executive director, my boss, and organize it in his inbox. He and another staff member were out of the office one day when I was going through the mail. When they walked in

the door, I said to my boss, “You might want to take a look at this letter right away.”

He looked at me, alert for trouble.

“Just read it,” I said.

He and the other fellow started to read the letter and had to sit down. A donor had died, and in her will she left the organization over a million dollars. This wasn't even someone they knew very well. She had given small amounts from time to time and always requested anonymity, which they honored. Apparently when she gave to other organizations and requested anonymity, they sometimes published her name anyway, and this ticked her off. But our nonprofit had just respected her wishes, and it worked on issues that she felt were important. So she gave us this huge bequest just for doing work that she felt was important and for treating her in a way that was honest, respectful, and authentic. We hadn't done anything special to earn it. The choice was hers, and she chose us.

Which I think is Jesus' point. When the rich man asks “What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?” he's approaching the matter as a financial transaction. He's coming at it through a money mindset and doesn't even realize it. Essentially he's asking how he can curry favor with God in order to make God promise him eternal life.

Jesus' response is to tell him to sell everything he has, give to the poor, and come follow Jesus. In other words, give up your entire frame of reference for what life is all about. Come do something that is really authentic and meaningful. Forget about how much money anyone has. Start loving people for who they are, not for how much they make. The rich man goes away grieving. We never meet him again.

That's the context in which we hear Jesus say, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the

eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” (10:24-25)

Prosperity as a sign of God’s favor is an old concept well established in the Bible: God says if you follow my commandments you will live long in the land which God gives you, have many children and abundant crops. Look at Jacob: he works hard, has multiple wives, many children, huge flocks, becomes wealthy, and this is seen as a good thing.

Even the Church can skip over this lesson. You may recall the practice of selling indulgences in Martin Luther’s day, 500 years ago. You sinned? Oh, pay here and we’ll reserve your seat in heaven. The Church itself was telling people, You can buy your way to eternal life.

As I understand it, Prosperity Gospel churches today similarly teach that wealth is a blessing from God. Imagine, then, that those living in poverty must have done something to tick off God. Do you have any obligation to help them out? Well, it must be God’s will that they be poor. Would you go against God?

By this prosperity line of thinking, Jesus should have been a millionaire. But somehow he didn’t get that message. So there appears to be some kind of flaw in the logic. The disciples are certainly shocked to hear the news that wealth and eternal life are not an automatic connection. “Then who can be saved?” they say. And Jesus says, Salvation is not up to you. It’s up to God. There is nothing you can *do* to make it happen except decide whether to say yes or not. God offers it freely to all of us.

And listen to Jesus’ sales pitch for following him and preaching the good news. If you give up “house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields” to follow Jesus and do the work of God, you will be repaid a hundredfold *with persecutions* and inherit eternal life. With persecutions! What’s not to love? Sign up today!

If we think that the goal in life is to make the most money, then we organize our lives and values around that goal. We worry that we're only being paid \$8 million to run our company when our colleague at some other company is making \$20 million. Suddenly \$8 million, which is more than we know how to spend, isn't enough. We put in security systems to guard our stuff, hire attorneys and accountants to manage our money, watch the stock market every day. We become too important to stop and talk to the guy peddling *Real Change* newspapers outside the grocery store. We begin to suspect everyone who curries favor with us, because maybe they're just being nice in order to get their hands on our money.

You see what a spiritual dead end this is. It actually cuts us off from relationships. One cannot begin to inherit eternal life or build the realm of God from this frame.

Some years ago I heard a lecture about coming economics. Through charts and graphs, the woman giving the lecture painted a truly bleak picture of the years ahead of us. Finally, someone asked her, "Then what can we do?" Rather like the disciples saying, "Then who can be saved?" And the woman said, as I recall, build resilient communities. Know your neighbors. Build strong relationships. Because money is not the answer to all the world's problems and we can't expect it to be. But authentic relationships mean you can get through hard times together.

We live in a country where the mantra is that we have to grow the economy. Always. But the reality is that you can't have an infinitely expanding economy on a finite planet. Inevitably, the economy will bump into the limits of the planet's capacity: air, water, soil, fossil fuels, forests, minerals. There's only so much of each.

If money is all that matters, we can strip all the arboreal forests of Alberta in search of tar sands oil. We can steam the oil out of the tar sand with water that is then held in tailings ponds so toxic that birds landing in the water die. We can insist on continuing to live a high-

carbon lifestyle that depends on such fossil fuels. We can go to war over our right to these resources.

If money is all that matters, then we don't want to let poor people into our country. Never mind that undocumented workers earning slave wages pay into our social services but often can't use those services because they don't have legal standing here. Or that their willingness to work in our fields for very little money is what allows us to have cheap food. It's on their backs. Never mind that the climate change our lifestyles have caused are making countries around the equator dry out, forcing fights over water and land, exacerbating other conflicts, and pushing many to become refugees. Shut the borders; they might be Muslims, and we can't have that kind of diversity here. They are often poor; they are people of color; they have different religions. Keep them out.

Wow. That's just not the world I want to live in. Not the frame I care to use to see my place in the universe.

Last weekend several million of us and our closest friends took to the streets to march for women's rights, human rights, Black lives matter rights, Muslim rights, climate change. I took pictures of people's signs. One that seems relevant to our topic today said, "You know things are messed up when accountants start marching." Even for the money people, at least for this accountant, it wasn't about the money.

Take a good look at the expression on this camel's face. It sees what these two guys in suits and top hats are trying to do. And it knows this is a very bad idea. Look at the body language: digging in its feet, leaning away. And these two fellows are paying no attention. Push that camel! We will make this work because there's money riding on it!

A good life is not about tons of money. Researchers have discovered that, beyond a certain point of taking care of one's expenses, more money does not make a person happier. More stuff does not make a

person happier. What does make a person happier? Authentic relationships. Work worth doing. Feeling needed. A community, a network of people—belonging. Hmm, that’s all sounding a little like church. It’s sounding like trying to follow in the path of Jesus to do work that has meaning.

- It means hanging out in community, wrestling with questions that matter, learning to love each other even when sometimes we are quite different—different incomes, different skin colors, different education levels, different physical and mental abilities.
- It means respecting people of other faiths who are wrestling with these same things.
- It means building bridges, not walls or moats or jails.
- It means letting refugees who are fleeing war and persecution and starvation and human rights abuses get off the plane and come into this country.
- It means taking to the streets to demand that we as a nation do better.
- It means learning to see and hear and love each other.
- It means learning to listen, through meditation, prayer, worship—for the voice of God guiding our lives.

So forget about falling at the feet of your wealthy elderly aunt. Forget about pushing that camel through an impossibly small needle. Let us focus on finding work that makes our hearts sing. Focus on wrestling with questions of love, including loving people at the margins, or people who are not like us. Do not focus on building your personal escape island, as I hear some wealthy people are now doing. Rather, build the realm of God. Insist on building a realm based on love, not money. Say yes to the salvation that God is offering, even with persecutions.

And then we can talk about inheriting eternal life. Amen.