

October 11, 2015



“For God All Things Are Possible”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Mark 10:17-31

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother.”’ He said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.’ Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, ‘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.’ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’

Peter began to say to him, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’ Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.’

Sometimes things come upon us despite ourselves. If you’ve been around here awhile, you know that each year about this time, we do a several week emphasis on our financial gifts that support the life of the church and its mission in the world. Our plan was to start that campaign *next* Sunday on Laity Sunday.

Then, lo and behold, I looked at today’s lectionary readings—that is, the Scriptures assigned to be read *this* Sunday and found this passage from the 10th chapter of Mark’s Gospel that’s all about the full measure of our devotion to Christ and the challenges to that posed by our attachment to our riches. And of course there’s that great expression about how 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.”

Well, I couldn’t see much wiggle room around this. Our financial stewardship work starts today. Now. So I decided to make this sermon into both a continuation of the “Marks of a Methodist” series which just won’t seem to quit, and a prequel to our financial giving series that can’t wait to get started. And maybe that’s OK because this is hard spiritual work we’re asked to do and an extra week to work on it is maybe just what we all need.

Let’s first go backwards. You all remember, don’t you?, the five marks or characteristics of a Methodist---there will be a test on this when you arrive at the Pearly Gates, so I want to make sure you know this-- a Methodist loves God, rejoices in God, gives thanks to God, prays constantly, loves others. You can pick up one of these little cards on your way out of worship today to help you remember.

And then we added the 6th Mark of a Methodist on Jim Smith Sunday--the 6th defining characteristic of a Methodist—a Methodist praises God in music.

You might say we carried the theme on forward last Sunday on World Communion Sunday when Robert talked about our siblings in faith here and all around the world. 7th Mark of a Methodist—a Methodist has global faith. Which brings us to today and the 8th Mark—a Methodist gives gratefully generously.

I know you’re all groaning now and praying I’ll get off this kick. Don’t worry—I’m pretty sure our Laity Sunday speakers next will will not belabor this point, but then again, I’m never quite sure what you all are going to come up with.

So let’s just go for it today! 8th Mark—a Methodist gives gratefully and generously. John Wesley was quite clear on this. Remember how he’s always pictured with long hair? That’s because he stopped getting haircuts—I’m not kidding—to save that money and give it away. He preached: “Do you not know that God entrusted you with that money (*all above what buys necessities for your families*) to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to help the stranger, the widow, the fatherless; and, indeed, as far as it will go, to relieve the wants of all mankind? How can you, how dare you, defraud the Lord, by applying it to any other purpose?”

8th Mark of a Methodist—a Methodist gives gratefully and generously.

You know, I heard a professional fundraiser, a United Methodist actually, say this past week that there are two kinds of people—people who are generous and people who aren’t. She feels that there’s not much point in expecting generosity from those who just aren’t.

I’ve been reflecting on that since she said it. Sure, I’ve know some very generous people and I’ve known people of considerable means who kept most of it for themselves. But I think the real issue for us is that both the generous and the ungenerous live inside of each of us. We may be generous at times. We may want to be more generous than we are. Our own selfishness may surprise and embarrass us sometimes. And so the spiritual work we’re called to do, within our own hearts, is to wrestle with our ungenerous self. We might call it “our internal camel.”

When Jesus said: “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,” he wasn’t pointing an accusing finger at some little group of Scrooges somewhere. He was asking all of us to look into our hearts and confront the camel within.

In biblical times, camels were pretty common, part of the fabric of life. So it should come as no surprise that a variety of proverbs about camels are found in the literature of the time. There was a proverb in the Koran which says, "For those who have denied and scorned Our revelations the gates of heaven shall not be opened; nor shall they enter Paradise until the camel shall pass through the eye of a needle" (Koran 7:39). There is a statement in the Talmud "A needle's eye is not too narrow for two friends, nor is the world wide enough for two enemies." Perhaps these proverbs were adapted from Jesus' proverb since both the Koran and the Jewish Talmud were written after Jesus' time. All have the same meaning: what's impossible for us humans.

That is—impossible for us if left to our own devices. But NOTHING is impossible with God.

Only God, working within us, can open our hearts wide enough for love and gratitude to take the place of our inner camel. Only love can bring us into right relationship with whatever riches God has entrusted to our stewardship. Only love can fill our hearts with gratitude and generosity—and I think that's available to all of us.

Granted, wrestling with our inner camel of selfishness and fear of scarcity and just plain indifference can be hard work. That's why growth as faithful and generous stewards is a spiritual *discipline*. Camels are pretty nasty creatures. They stink. They spit. They kick. They bite. They snarl and hiss. Give me a puppy or a horse any day over a camel. Jesus knew. John Wesley knew. Conversion into a right relationship with our material resources requires the love and grace of God working in our hearts to transform us and set us free.

We are helped in this spiritual work by seeing for ourselves just what this love can do. This year's theme for our financial stewardship campaign is a question: "What Does Love Look Like?" Because when we open our eyes, and open our hearts, and pay attention, we see the love of God all around us in ways that open us to deeper gratitude and generosity.

What does love look like? It looks like every face captured in our new pictorial directory. It looks like the children who gather on these steps and will be running around the courtyard during Coffee Hour. Love looks like the many folks who worshipped on Jim Smith Sunday and stayed for a wonderful afternoon of fellowship and celebration. What does love look like? It looks like those gathered yesterday afternoon for Christian Dodd's Eagle Scout Court of Honor. It looks like caring hands bringing dinner to someone who has just lost a loved one. It looks like someone who really needs a hug or a prayer quilt and finds it here.

What does love look like? It reaches far beyond these walls, this community. All the way to South Carolina where a member's family has been impacted by the terrible floods and we respond with our gifts through the United Methodist Committee on Relief. Love reaches through our prayers up to Oregon where another member's family member was killed on the Umpqua campus. Love looks like the English-speaking United Methodist congregation in Vienna, Austria, where some of our members worship for parts of each year, a small congregation housing and supporting twenty refugee families who have fled Syria to find life and a future.

What does love look like? On a weekend where anti-Muslim rallies were held all across the country, some of them described as open carry events—meaning "bring your guns"—love looks like a congregation brave and compassionate and faithful enough to gladly host Friday Muslim prayers each week to welcome our neighbors and friends to prayer.

These are just some of the faces of love we will be lifting up over these next few weeks, that our hearts might open up a bigger place of gratitude and generosity and that our financial gifts might reflect all that we experience and feel and want—for our lives, for the lives of those we love, and for the lives of those Robert last week called our "siblings" all around the world, God's people in every place, especially the lost and the forgotten and the most vulnerable ones among them.

What does love look like? Let the faces well up within you. Trust me—your inner camel will back way off. And over time, it may even shrink down small enough to squeeze through the eye of a needle!

For all things are possible for God. For it is our God, of course, who first showed us what love looks like. God created the heavens and the earth and saw that it was good. God placed in the heavens a rainbow as a sign of the everlasting covenant between God, God's creation, and God's people. And God...God SO loved the world that he gave us Jesus so that we could see the face of that love, and claim it for ourselves, and find in it the door to everlasting life.

What does love look like? Look around. Look within. Stare down that inner camel. And give thanks to God for opening our hearts, sometimes despite ourselves, to a grateful love, a generous love, that is like unto the very love of God for whom nothing is impossible.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

Notes:

Series based on Steve Harper's [Five Marks of a Methodist: The Fruit of a Living Faith](#).
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