“Threading the Needle”
Lake Street Church
August 18, 2013
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Call to worship: (from Jeremiah 6:16)

Leader: “Stand at the crossroads and look;
Congregation: ask for the ancient paths,
Leader: ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
All: and you will find rest for your souls.”

Ancient Witness:

Mark 10:17-26

As Jesus 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; Honor 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?"

She was one of my heroes as a child: LaWanda Krumery was one of the kindest people I ever knew. She loved us kids, served as our Sunday school teacher, made the best taco salad at the church potlucks, and was my favorite person to sit next to during services: she would pull out her handkerchief from her purse, and roll and twist it into the form of a doll—keeping me entertained and quiet whilst dad preached. She laughed easily and always had a twinkle in her eye.

It was that congregation’s tradition to take hymn requests for the music of the Sunday night sermons. Each request was often accompanied by a testimony (a public witness of that person’s spiritual journey). When she was asked to select the hymn, it never failed: Wanda would choose ‘Deeper Deeper’ and explained her choice to the entire congregation that the line “Deeper, deeper, in the love of Jesus daily let me go; higher, higher in the school of wisdom; more of grace to know” was God’s calling on her life. She wanted to love more deeply, and be more gracious. I will always associate that hymn with her.
But twice this jovial, kind woman scared my brother and me. During Sunday school she brought my brother to tears because she talked about the need to ask Jesus into your heart (she said while pointing to her heart). Bill’s face fell at this requirement--the tears began to flow freely. What’s the matter, Billy? She’d asked. Between sobs he managed to get out “I can’t ask Jesus into my heart” he said “Because I don’t have one of those.” –he pointed where she’d been pointing: to her voluptuous chest. Wanda later told my dad he needed to ‘have a talk with the boy.’ 😊

The second time she scared us, I was sitting on the floor of her Sunday School class in a store front church in East St. Louis, learning about the rich young man who wanted to go to heaven, and Jesus saying that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God. Maybe it was my steady diet of Bugs Bunny at the time, but gross cartoonish imagery went through my mind: what it would take to shove a camel through the eye of a needle. I was aghast. And the violence and impossibility of it all was overwhelming. I couldn’t make that bloody imagery mesh with the loving and generous woman I knew. I also couldn’t quite mesh the conditions laid out in the text with the unconditional love I knew she strived for. The tension was too much for a little girl to hold: I placed that scripture in my ‘pigeon-hole of suspended judgment’—a location where I stored lots of the perplexing paradoxes that growing up the church fostered-- and cautiously went about my business.

But I grew up in a tradition that took scripture quite seriously. This text simply wasn’t allowed to lie fallow for long. This troubling text haunted me when my parents were missionaries in Papua New Guinea. While we weren’t wealthy by western standards, we certainly lived at a different and much higher standard than those to whom we ministered. Even if it was meager, we were salaried and living amongst subsistence farmers. We were expatriate whites in a country of colonized Blacks. We were educated. Our passports carried a seal which promised even the protection of the US government. We had a safety net. We were privileged. And in that sense, we were wealthy. I felt doomed.

As the text confronted me in my teens, I began to seek explanations of the harsh language which emanated from the mouth of Jesus. “Easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle”? What did God have against the wealthy? Could the wealthy not also be pure of heart? I knew the poor, and I knew better than to idealize them.

So I began to look for ways of explaining the texts which would relieve me of this anxiety: And based on the plethora of commentaries out there on the subject, it seems I wasn’t the only one who found this text troublesome.

The most common interpretations of the text revolve around attempts to soften the blow of Jesus’ words by minimizing the metaphor. There are two prominent ways of thinking about the parable of the “camel through the eye of the needle”—‘Traditional’ explanations noted the narrow gates going into city walls. After dark, when the main gates were closed, travelers and merchants would have to use smaller gates, a sort of a door within the door, through which only small camels could enter only by supposedly crawling on their knees. Traders and travelers would have to have the bags taken off the sides of the camel, unpacked, with the riches removed, in order to fit through such a narrow gate. Since Jesus also speaks of entering through the straight gate, this could be what he had in mind. Although there is no historical/archeological evidence of such a gate existing. And as one Roman Catholic commentator wrote
“This I understand now as a wishfully interpreted gate in Jerusalem conjured up by Sunday school teachers.”—designed to soften the tone of Jesus’ instructions.

Other scholarship considers that the Aramaic word for camel is very similar to the word for rope and that it was translated as a mistake. This opens up an interesting thought: for a rope to pass through the eye of a sewing needle, it must be unwound, simplified, reduced to the threads that constitute it. As God is compassionate, merciful, and forgiving, the analysis of the parable remained clear. The wealthy will have to unpack their distracting lifestyle, humble themselves, simplify themselves, focus their vision in order to walk the narrow way that leads to eternal life.

I felt some relief. I could deal with pietism: give me something formulaic about faith; something I could apprehend and comprehend (in the sense of grasping or laying hold of something). “Tell me what I must do to be saved”—to echo the words of the rich young man.

But a broader textual study of the phrase “eye of the needle” within different religious traditions of the time reveals a different story:

- The Babylonian (Syrian) Talmud makes use of a very similar phrase with equal emphasis on the hyperbole: stating that something is as impossible as a palm tree of gold, or an elephant passing through the eye of a needle.
- The Qumran (7.40) contains the phrase: “To those who reject our teachings and treat them with arrogance, no opening will there be of the gates of heaven, nor will they enter the garden, until the camel can pass through the eye of the needle…”

This phrase appears to be common parlance to indicate the difficulty or improbability of something occurring. And in all instances, there seems to be a hint of humor contained therein: a little tongue in cheek. A modern equivalent might be for us to talk about the difficulty of something to be like “herding cats” or “nailing Jell-O to a tree”.

But a Jewish Midrash on the Song of Songs uses the phrase to speak of God's willingness and ability beyond comparison, to accomplish intimacy between God and creation: “The Holy One said, open for me a door as big as a needle’s eye and I will open for you a door through which may enter tents and [camels?].” And again in a Midrash on Genesis the needle’s eye was mentioned in that “A needle’s eye is not too narrow for two friends, but a world isn’t big enough for two enemies…” Here in the Jewish midrash, we see that the needle’s eye was used not as a parable for the impossibility of a given task, but rather to emphasize the possibility! Give me an opening the size of a needle’s eye, and I’ll throw the doors open wide! Given Jesus’ penchant for quoting the Jewish scriptures of his day, it is highly likely that it was in this sense that Jesus uttered the phrase. Indeed, if we read the final verse of the section that Tim read earlier as the Ancient Witness, we hear Jesus proclaim “With God, all things are possible.”
All these years I’ve read that text with the emphasis on the wrong syllable!

Let’s return to the narrative for a closer reading:

As Jesus 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, “You know the commandments… " 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, then come, follow me."

As we listen to the instructions of Jesus to the rich man with an eye towards possibility (instead of impossibility) we pay closer attention to the posture of Jesus as he uttered this phrase. The text tells us that Jesus said it lovingly—without a hint of judgment. If anything, one can read compassion in the tone. And the instructions were simple and clear.

First, an acknowledgement of place: You lack one thing. One thing: not a litany of sins for which you must confess and make restitution. Instead it is the acknowledgement that one who seemingly has EVERYTHING, lacks one thing.

The only claim the young man had made was that he’d kept the commandments. And there is no indication that Jesus doesn’t take him at his word on that. But what stands out to this reader of the text is the very ego-centric response “I have kept all these since my youth.” You see, it is only from a very privileged and self-sufficient position (AKA the rich young man) that we can assume that have arrived by our own volition. Only the privileged are blind to the help they receive from others.

A few years ago I ran the Center for Ethics and Values at the Seminary at Northwestern. I had 3 faculty members and 4 PhD candidates working in the center—all men—and as academics are wont to do, these gentlemen paid little attention to the details. None of them knew how to load paper in the copy machine. They had no concept of the time and logistics it took to host a conference. For as intelligent as these men were, I was often amused at the ‘magical world’ they seemed to live in. Things just HAPPENED for them. The storage closet was one of the magicians’ tools. I recall one day the Head of the Ethics Department standing in front of the closet with the door flung wide, aghast that the item he was looking for wasn’t present. His frustration was evident. Did you use the last of them? I innocently asked. Yes, he said. Did you let anyone know we were out? I asked. “No.” You do realize that I don’t read minds. How did you think I’d know to order more? “Um… I don’t know. Things just appear in there. I don’t know how they get there.” Was the response. From an Oxford PhD.

Only the privileged are blind to the help they receive from others.
Jesus's admonition to the man to sell his belongings and tend to the poor in the community was a means of stripping away the trappings of privilege or privatized notions of faith (just as the camel has to be unloaded to fit through a narrow gate, or the rope unwound to pass through a needle).

Second, Jesus invites the man to join the community by the invitation to ‘follow me’. The way of Jesus is a journey. We are pilgrims together on a spiritual journey: sojourners along the Way. Having “arrived” is never an option within the teachings of Jesus, but instead following the living traditions of Jesus means opening ourselves up to continued growth on the journey, and it means casting aside all privileged notions of privacy and instead joining in the communal pace. We are pilgrims on the journey, and those who have gone before us light the way.

And here I want to pause to consider our own location as we read this text. While there is a measure of diversity amidst our congregation, there is also evidence that we aren’t quite as diverse as we’ve imagined ourselves to be. You will remember the results of the search committee’s demographic study indicated this very clearly. We are largely a congregation of privilege. And while the usual suspects can be addressed (male privilege, white privilege, north shore privilege, economic privilege, educational privilege, etc.) I think what is most interesting to consider from this text is another form of privilege we both bizarrely sing the praises of, and at the same time frequently ignore: that is the idea that we are ‘exceptional’. We do believe ourselves to be "exceptional" (i.e., unusual or extraordinary). We like to define ourselves by what we are not… that is, we aren’t too Christian… we aren’t really Baptist… we don’t really require anything of our members… etc.

A group may assert exceptionalism, in order to exaggerate the appearance of difference, perhaps to create an atmosphere permissive of a wider latitude of action. The term "exceptionalism" can imply criticism of a tendency to remain separate from others. For example, the reluctance of the United States government to join various international treaties is sometimes called "exceptionalist", as is an assertion that a person or group refuses to acknowledge, and perhaps communally participate in, a widely-accepted principle or practice.

When Jesus asks the privileged man to dispossess himself, he merely asked that man to do what the other followers of Jesus had committed to: equality and participation in the life of the community of pilgrims. No unusual demands were made. Grief came for the rich man, when he thought himself somehow to be an exception to the rule, that is, unwilling to submit to the discipline what it means to be in community.

Perhaps we need to consider the ease at which we can dismiss the collective wisdom of both those who have gone before and those who walk along side us. I wonder if our particular interpretation of ‘soul liberty’ has moved us into the realm of the privileged privatized faith? How do we find balance, allowing for both the individual to work out his or her own faith, and the spiritually formative role of community?

A few years ago I attended a large ‘mega’ church in Oklahoma City. I had been visiting a friend in town, and happened to also be acquainted with the minister (we’d gone to seminary together). They just built a new building and he was quite keen to show it off.
The building was in the suburbs, and new the sanctuary was large, clean and spacious. There were clearly marked signs pointing to the restrooms, the fellowship hall, and the sanctuary. There were hand sanitizer dispensers outside each door. The bulletin spelled out the order of worship clearly, and gave hints and the customs of the congregation. His staff clearly ran the church like a well-oiled machine. There was theater-style seating, with wide aisles and lots of leg room. The arm rests were padded and I could stretch out my legs comfortably. The minister stood in the pulpit only a few meters from me, but because they also had large projection screens, I could opt to watch the sermon ‘larger than life’. And there were no troublesome hymnals to have to locate or share. The songs were projected up on screens for all to see.

My friend came up after the service SO very proud of his church and asked me my thoughts. In all honesty, all I could think of was “I just went to church and never touched anyone. My hip didn’t rub up against anyone’s hip in the pew. I never had to share a hymnal, or ask for help to locate things. I didn’t even have to look at the live ‘performance’ of either the minister or the worship leaders. I could do it virtually. This has been one of the loneliest church experiences I’ve ever had.”

It is experiences like this which make me love life in the city: the hassle and the congestion, the inconvenience and the need to deal with that which is less desirable or uncomfortable. It seems that ‘church’ should also be that way: I want to touch and be touched. Even when it means risk. I want to get my hands dirty.

And as a theologian, I had to consider this when joining the church. This the question I had to face: was I willing to let this minister, and this congregation, form me spiritually? Could I trust them to do so?

I’ll close with an ancient Buddhist story where the Buddha talked about the role of community in our spiritual journeys. The Buddha’s faithful attendant, Ananda, asked about the importance of having wholesome companions. Ananda asked the Buddha whether having noble friends and companions wasn’t half of the holy life. The Buddha replied: “Do not say so, Ananda. Noble friends and companions are the whole of the holy life.” (SN 45.2, Bhikkhu Bodhi) Friends, let us truly be companions together on this spiritual journey: open to each other’s gifts and critique.

**The call to commitment** (an adaptation of W. S. Merwin’s poem “Separation”)

"Your presence has gone through me
Like thread through a needle.
Everything I do is stitched with its color."

**Benediction**

Go in peace, disturbed only by that which strips us of our pretense and privilege, and open to the gentle influence of the Spirit in whom we live and move and have our being.