

28th Sunday of Ordinary Time “What would you sacrifice?”

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My friends, every so often someone raises the concern with me that they can't find any instance in the Gospels of Jesus smiling, laughing or telling a joke. Each time this concern is voiced, I reassure them that there are several moments in the Gospels that are intentionally laugh out loud funny if you know how to interpret what is going on. In today's Gospel reading, we have such a moment.

Jesus says, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." This is funny, if you know what Jesus is referring to when he speaks of the needle's eye. When I was last in the Holy Land, our group went to Masada where our tour guide pointed out in the ruins the architectural significance of this. You see, to make sure the people entering your fort were easy to inspect before passing inside, they had the entrance designed so that you had two large walls on both sides of the road coming together to make a holding area with a small entryway. This small door was called the eye of the needle, a place where people could only enter one at a time. This made inspections easier and kept the city safe from invasion, especially after hours. Because the entry here is quite small, a camel would be a tight squeeze.

You see, Jesus is telling his disciples that it is easier for a camel to get through an eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven because the rich man is fatter than the camel. Get it? It is hard for us to get this joke, but the people living at this time would have been rolling on the floor laughing. It's funny. The disciples knew however that even Jesus' jokes had a deeper significant meaning so they reasonably ask the question, “who then can be saved?” Jesus reassures them, probably still laughing when he says this, “This is impossible for human beings but not for God. All things are possible for God.”

I suppose a modern day equivalent would be asking someone, “Do you want to get to heaven?” To which they respond, “Yes, sign me up”. The follow up question, “Well, what would you sacrifice to get into heaven?” And the response is, “Well, let me think about that!” This isn't to say there is anything necessarily wrong with the things we accumulate in this life. It is just that, when it comes to going to heaven, we can't take it with us. Attachments in this world can weigh us down. It reminds me of the joke regarding a man who God promised he could take one suitcase with him to heaven when he died. So, in his will, he had a suitcase full of gold next to his hospital bed. When he passed during the night, an angel lugged that suitcase to the pearly gates with one hand and the soul of the deceased man in the other. St. Peter looked at the man the angel brought and then the suitcase filled with gold, scratched his head, and says, “Oh great, more pavement”. There is a spiritual truth in today's Gospel reading. God can't fill our

cup with something infinitely better if it is already full with something lesser. If we can't empty our cup, God can't fill something that is already full.

And so let's talk about the rich man in today's Gospel. The rich man approached Jesus and asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answered, "Follow the commandments." The rich man responds, "I have followed all the commandments since my youth, there must be something more?" The Gospel says Jesus looked at him and loved him, like a teacher who loves the student who cares less about what must be minimally accomplished to pass the grade and who rather wishes to obtain wisdom for wisdom's sake alone. Jesus doesn't disappoint, "You lack one thing", Jesus says, "Go sell everything you have. Give to the poor and follow me." The rich man went away sad because the homework assignment involved a huge sacrifice.

Now, does Jesus sometimes ask disciples to literally sell everything, give to the poor and to follow him? Yes. Ask Mother Teresa about that! For most of us, I believe this is more of a spiritual invitation to consider the questions, "what possessions do I own?" and "what possessions own me?" What is limiting us from growing in the spirit life? What was limiting the rich man's progression in the spirit life, in Jesus' estimation, was his inordinate attachment to earthly possessions. He needed to empty his cup before Jesus could fill it. This is why he walked away sad. We can ask ourselves: do we have inordinate attachments to earthly passions that are limiting our spiritual growth? What are they? These are healthy questions from our Gospel reading for us to contemplate.

The good news of the Gospel reading is that the rich man's salvation wasn't in jeopardy. He followed the commandments after all and all things are possible for God for those who are sincere about living a good life. What the rich man wanted was a higher bar to follow, and Jesus sure gave him one. If Jesus gave you a higher bar to follow this week, what would it be? Are we willing to empty our cup so that Jesus can fill it with something better? You see, there is this God shaped hole in our hearts that we fill with all kinds of earthly attachments, addictions and desires that keep us from growing. Like JRR Tolkien's description of hobbits. The more comfortable we find ourselves, the less willing we are to go on an adventure. And as an aside, Bilbo described this problem best at the beginning of the Hobbit when he gave his opinion about adventures, "Nasty disturbing uncomfortable things. Make you late for dinner!"

My friends, Jesus offered this rich man, and offers you and me, an opportunity for a spiritual adventure, perhaps the most meaningful adventure of our lives. Adventures are risky however. Adventures can be dangerous. Adventures can involve all kinds of discomfort at times. Anyone who is truly living their vocation in this life and sacrificed for their vocation understands this. In every adventure, there comes a moment where we confront the eye of the needle, a place where something has to be left behind if we are going to move forward.

This coming week can we all spend some time with Jesus and ask this question of ourselves, what are the attachments, addictions and desires I need to leave behind so to pass through the eye of the needle? When you stop to think about it, what lies beyond the eye of the needle could be salvation itself! And I think this is a good exercise for anyone in the Body of Christ, for lay people, priests and bishops alike, especially in this day and age. What do I need to empty from my cup so that Jesus can fill it anew? And when we begin to wonder whether this is even possible for us to let go of whatever attachments that weigh us down, we are invited to find consolation, hope, and dare I say, a newfound faith from Jesus' words today, that what is impossible for human beings is not impossible for God. "All things are possible for God."