

SELL ALL YOU HAVE (Matthew 19:16-30)

It turns out I'm not the only one who wishes Jesus had never met the rich man in today's lesson so we wouldn't have to deal with what Jesus has to say about riches and wealth. That might make some of us feel less guilty. Of course, the rich man probably wished he had kept his mouth shut in the first place because it turned out to be not a very happy meeting for him. Even the disciples were nonplussed by what they heard.

This story has been a problem from the very beginning. And interpreters have strained the text to find some wiggle room in Jesus' teaching and soften the demand he makes.

Some of the early manuscripts substitute "rope" for "camel" in the saying about going through the eye of a needle because in Greek the words for "camel" and "rope" sound alike and are spelled the same except for one letter. That might make the image more consistent – rope is more like thread than a camel is. But it's just as impossible to put a rope through the eye of a needle. So that doesn't help very much.

Later, in medieval times a legend grew up that there was a tiny gate in the Jerusalem wall called the Needle's Eye – a gate that was too small for loaded camels to pass through unless they were unloaded, got down on their knees, and crawled through. I remember hearing that legend passed off as fact in a few sermons when I was growing up. Unfortunately, it's just that: a legend. The only place such a gate ever existed was in the mind of the interpreters of this story. Jesus wasn't referring to an imaginary gate.

Another explanation is that Jesus has a double standard, one for ordinary Christians and another for elite spiritual superheroes. Ordinary Christians just want to be good enough, but the superheroes aspire to be perfect. One step on the road to perfection was to get rid of earthly encumbrances. That interpretation primarily appealed to monks who took vows of poverty. Unfortunately, Jesus himself never actually distinguishes between grades of disciples, never set up a double standard.

In the end, I'm afraid there's really no good way to get around Jesus' actual words, no way to parse them into something less demanding.

Peter Gomes from Harvard was once invited to join a group of wealthy Texas businessmen for a weekend discussing the relationship between faith and wealth. They wanted to know what Jesus had to say and were especially interested in the story of the rich man in today's lesson.

You can understand their interest. They were probably hoping Gomes would tell them that Jesus didn't literally mean what he said.

Here was a fellow very much like them, someone who would be a catch for any church. He was interested in spiritual things. He was a moral straight arrow. He was eager to do good things. And, oh, by the way, he was rich, really

rich. He wasn't like the usual ragtag followers Jesus tended to attract. He would be the answer to the prayers of many a church. Instant deficit reduction.

So why didn't Jesus take him just the way he was? By just about any normal standard, this fellow was very good – and if he wasn't good enough, who would be? Couldn't Jesus have cut him even a little slack? Get him on the membership rolls, give him a pledge card. He would have gone to the top of the contributors' list. Not Jesus. Jesus says the one thing that's calculated to push him away: "Unload all those possessions and give the money to the poor and then you can follow me." I can just hear the chair of the stewardship committee groan when Jesus speaks those words.

Maybe Jesus knew the possessions would always get in the way, that this fellow was possessed by his possessions. Notice that Jesus never condemns the man for being rich, never suggests that he's not entitled to what he has. What he does seem to be doing is testing the man's level of commitment, challenging him to trust in God and not in all the things he's accumulated, daring him to give up financial security for what he claims he really wants.

Whatever Jesus' motives may have been, the test is just too much. Good as this fellow was, he seems to have lacked the faith it would take to imagine life without all those things that he had surrounded himself with, all those things that he counted on to keep him safe and secure. He knew exactly what Jesus was asking him to do, he weighed the pros and the cons, and in the end he didn't dare make the leap. It was the only choice he could make, and he knew it was the wrong choice as he went away grieving because he realized what it was that held him back.

The human interest part of this story gets our attention. It's poignant and finally sad. But the way Jesus explains it to the disciples is what we ought to pay attention to. "It will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven," he says. And then he offers up that image of a camel trying to fit through the eye of a needle. What gets in the way is clear: riches. Peter Gomes said his wealthy Texas businessmen hadn't quite got that point because they hadn't heard many sermons on this story in their churches. So he summed it up for them this way: Wealth is not a sin, but it is a problem.

Not just in this story, but all through the Bible – Old Testament and New Testament. Which isn't to say the Bible is consistent because it's not. Attitudes toward wealth range from seeing it as a sign of God's favor to outright condemnation.

As for Jesus, he is not necessarily against wealth as such, only against the insidious effect it has on people who put too much trust in what they can see and count. That's the ultimate problem of the man in today's lesson – not that he's wicked, but that he's ruled by earthly treasure instead of heavenly treasure. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Wealth itself is neutral, but it can deceive and seduce human beings.

But it can also be used for good if it's treated as a means and not an end in itself.

In the 2nd century Clement of Alexandria wrote a tract called *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* He makes the point that Jesus says we will be

judged by how we treat the least among us – the hungry, the naked, the homeless – the very people we see pictured in these stained glass windows here in the chapel. And then he asks a very practical question: How can we give food to the hungry and shelter to the homeless and clothing to the naked if we've given away everything we have? Wealth, Clement says, is to be a servant of righteousness, used to benefit our neighbors.

We're all familiar with the apostle Paul's hymn to love in the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians. You hear it at just about every wedding. But do you remember how it went in the King James Version? "Though I speak in the tongues of men and of angels and have not charity..." The Greek word translated "charity" in the King James Version and "love" in modern translations is *agape*, which means "love" but has nothing to do with sentimentality and romantic feeling. *Agape* is self-giving love, sacrificial love, the kind of love that promotes the welfare of others. "Charity" may indeed come closer to what Paul means than "love."

Charity is what we do for others because of what God has done for us. Because God has been good to us, we are obliged to translate our blessings into care for our neighbor, for the orphan, the alien, the stranger, and all those in need. God has blessed us in order that we can give and be a blessing in return.

You may be wondering how Peter Gomes's weekend with those Texas businessmen went. "They didn't like a word I had to say," he writes, but I certainly got their attention with a little help from Jesus' words on wealth in the New Testament, and when one talks about money and faith, that is no small beginning."