

Text: Ecclesiastes 5:10-20

Theme: “Needles, Camels and Money”

You have probably heard this text from the Gospel used in various stewardship sermons many times. Don’t get excited. This is not a stewardship sermon. Well, not entirely stewardship anyway. Many times I have heard Jesus’ metaphor explained like this. In Jerusalem there is a gate into the city called the eye of the needle because it is so narrow. In order for a merchant or trader to pass through this gate, he would have to unload his camel, take the camel through and then hand carry all his goods through and then re-pack the camel on the other side. The point being that great riches hamper one’s ability to serve God because one has to spend so much time and effort taking care of the riches.

Other Biblical scholars vigorously disagree and say there was no such gate in Jerusalem. Jesus’ metaphor was intended to be just as ludicrous as it sounds. It is easier for a literal camel to pass through a literal eye of a sewing needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. Jesus was trying to show how ridiculous it is to trust in wealth for salvation and how, in fact, great wealth actually makes it nearly impossible to trust fully in God.

So once more, as is often the case for me, I come to the point of asking,

“So what? Who cares?” The point is the same either way.

Possessions impact faith. The more I possess and control, the more I am

tempted to believe that I am self-sufficient and don't have to depend on God for all my needs. The more I possess and control, the more I am tempted to believe that it is all MINE to do with as I wish. The more I possess and control, the more I am tempted to focus all my energy on this mortal life instead of eternal life with God.

This is the same point that King Solomon is making in Ecclesiastes, only from a slightly different angle. With Jesus, you can say, "But he doesn't understand. He's God. Of course he doesn't need money. When did he ever have a sick kid, rent that was due and a car repair bill coming on Friday?" You know that King Solomon was wealthy. But did you know how wealthy? He is thought to have been the richest man ever to have lived? In modern equivalents, King Solomon was worth over 2.1 trillion dollars. To get an idea of the vastness of that wealth, think of it this way. If you were 80 years old, to have 2.1 trillion dollars, you would have had to have saved about 75 million dollars every day of your life. King Solomon knew wealth, so it is interesting that he speaks so disparagingly of that which so many people covet.

The richest man of all time says, "Sweet is the sleep of the laborer!" He says that riches hurt the owner! Sounds an awful lot like camels squeezing through the eyes of needles doesn't it? Beyond being ridiculously impossible, think of how painful it would be for the camel! It would break every bone in the camel's body. Sound's hideous. It is

hideous. It is likewise hideous watching the way money and possessions crush a human being over time.

Solomon learned that the joy of life is in the labor, not in the remuneration! Adam and Eve were placed in the garden to work because work is where we find joy and satisfaction in life. In fact, some of the most rewarding work we do is volunteer work because we don't get confused by remuneration. Money always confuses us. Society values money so as soon as money comes into the equation, we are tempted to assign value to our work based on the amount of money we get for it. Is a doctor more valuable than a checker at Jewel? Is a basketball player more valuable than a doctor? Or is everyone who uses his gifts to God's glory and for the good of his fellow human beings equally valuable to God and society regardless of his particular gifts?

When Christ died on the cross, our sins were forgiven and we were given eternal paradise. What more could we possibly want? All that matters is that we spend the time we are on earth glorifying God and keeping our faith fed with his Word and Sacrament. Faith, given to us in Baptism and the Word of God, is the only thing that grasps the gift of salvation. None of the stuff we pack on our camels are going to do us any good in just a few short years. The danger is that the more goods we have the more we will be tempted to trust in our own material wealth instead of trusting in God.

“Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.” If you have very little materially, but your faith is powerful, you can relax. So what if you have an old car. So what if your house isn’t as fancy as the houses in another neighborhood. You have an eternity of paradise waiting for you. But if you have many material things to keep and defend, it is normal to worry. There are only so many hours in a day and if the stock market, the job and attention to all your sports, toys and hobbies consume your time, where is there time for God? When will you nourish your faith? Is making money more important than building your relationship with God? Is playing sports, camping or sleeping more important than building your relationship with God? We only have so much time on this earth. Don’t waste that time and sacrifice your faith for some meaningless thing that King Solomon calls vanity. For how hard it will be to shove that camel through the eye of a needle.