

## **Lectionary 28 B 2021**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

October 10, 2021

Mark 10:17-31; Psalm 90:12

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

*For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.* For God, all things are possible. If you see that on a bumper sticker, you probably think of miracles. Diseases cured. Lives saved. The powers of evil defeated. *For God, all things are possible.* Expect a miracle.

But when Jesus says these words, he is not talking about curing someone's blindness. Jesus is talking about salvation. Jesus is responding to the disciples' question: *Then who can be saved?* The disciples were greatly astounded, it said. And they asked one another: *Then who can be saved?* And that's when Jesus says, *For God all things are possible.* For mortals it is impossible. For God all things are possible. This isn't about curing blindness or parting the Red Sea or turning water into wine. It is not possible for human beings to save themselves. It *IS* possible for God to save them.

I grew up in the Christian church, so since childhood I have been hearing Jesus say, "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." Obviously, a camel cannot be threaded through the eye of a needle. So someone who is rich is not able, or unlikely, to enter the kingdom of God. I realized at a fairly young age that I fit the definition of rich. Even the poorest people in our society have more than Jesus and his disciples. More food, more clothing, more health, more books, more opportunity, more everything. We are vastly more wealthy than the people around Jesus. And we are vastly more wealthy in this country than most of the world's peoples. So when Jesus is talking about a rich person, he doesn't just mean a Silicon Valley billionaire. We fit the definition. I realized that pretty early in life. We are rich by the standards of the Bible. And this is bad news for us. Mark states, "*When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*" When we hear this, if we understand it, we too are shocked.

When I was college age, I was told that there was a tiny gate into the walled city of Jerusalem, and it was possible for a person to get through it. But a pack animal could not. According to this notion, the owner of the animal would have to take all of the possessions off of the animal's back, and then the animal might squeeze through. According to this notion, Jesus did not say "the eye of a needle," but he said, "the eye of the needle" in reference to this gate. And if you go to Jerusalem, they show the tourists this place. But historically, there is no evidence that this was ever true in the times of Jesus. It appears to be a medieval legend which reduces the harshness of

Jesus' words. He was not talking about something impossible, according to this notion; he was simply talking about something that was awkward. Awkward, maybe difficult, but possible. "*When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*" For centuries, Christians have been shocked by this expression and have tried to find ways to explain around it. "I'm not really rich," we say. Or we invent a technicality, that Jesus wasn't really talking about the eye of an actual needle, but he was talking about an architectural idiosyncrasy of the Jerusalem wall.

But I think Jesus is trying to make a point about impossibility. A key detail in this story is that Jesus gazed at the man and loved him. It's that verb *agape*. Love that is not erotic, love that is not mutual. The love that is supremely concerned with the well being of someone else. Jesus loves this man, even as he takes aim at the bull's-eye of the man's predicament. We are ultimately in a predicament. Each of us. It's the predicament that last Sunday's sermon also spoke of, when I said we are *mortally* precarious and *morally* precarious. When we are alone with our choices and our actions and our conscience. Which is how it is in the presence of God. We answer to him for our choices and our actions. And we can't make excuses or compare ourselves to others. In this particular case of wealth and poverty, we are part of a human family, and there is always suffering going on. If I spread peanut butter on a cracker and I eat it, there is simultaneously somebody in the world who is dying for a morsel of food. Literally dying of malnutrition. I am part of that larger picture, that web of connections. I am beautifully connected to the creation and to the human family. And I am frighteningly connected to the creation and to the human family. So my carbon footprint, the wasted food that I put in the trash, the money that I spend on Netflix, the man standing in the intersection seeking a handout, the prisoner who is forgotten in jail, the person whose mental health makes them unable to work... I am connected to all of them. In some sense, I have a share of responsibility for all of them. And that is frightening. I try not to think about it. But in this gospel reading today, Jesus forces this man to think about it. Because he loved him.

*For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.* Our predicament is impossible. We are mortally precarious and we are morally precarious all the time. And that requires some modesty. Which Jesus addressed with his disciples in last week's gospel, and will do so again in next week's gospel. And our impossible predicament requires God, necessitates God for us. In other words, the only way out of our impossible predicament is to go through God. In one simple word: *Grace*.

So let's say that I am spreading my peanut butter on my cracker. It's crunchy peanut butter, because I like crunchy. And as I spread the peanut butter, I can despair that I live in a world where people are malnourished. Or I can talk to God. And I can ask God to help the people who are malnourished. And I can tell God thank you for the cracker and for the crunchy peanut butter. And I can enjoy the peanut butter and the cracker, and I can tell God how good it is. The Bible calls that singing God's praises. And that's how I get by. I am morally precarious. But God is with me. *For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.*

There are all kinds of lies I can tell myself. And I often do. I can tell myself that I deserve good things, and other people do not. I deserve peanut butter and they deserve to starve. I can tell that lie to myself. Or I can pretend that there are no hungry people in the world. It's a happy world, a just world, and I don't need to worry about it. I can tell that lie to myself. Or I can lose my joy. I can eat the peanut butter and the cracker, but it might as well be dirt, because I can't enjoy it because all I can think about is how bad the world is. Those are some of my options. Lies and despair. But with God, I don't have to lie, and I don't have to despair. I can care about the world, and I can enjoy my peanut butter cracker, because God enables me to hold those things together. My impossible predicament is a very possible place for him. And the next time I buy peanut butter, God may prompt me to buy a second jar for the food pantry. And not just any jar. But extra crunchy. So that his joy and my joy can become someone else's joy.

Our psalm refrain today says, "*So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.*" I think that is a call to reckon with our predicament. Our moral precariousness and our mortal precariousness. Number our days. To be aware of our predicament. And in that, we may begin to find the wisdom of God. Jesus looked at the man and loved him. God sees us and knows us and loves us. That is our possibility. For mortals, it is impossible. But not for God. God is our *possibility*. Amen.