

Saint Matthew's/San Mateo Episcopal Church

Pentecost 20, Proper 23, October 10, 2021

READINGS:

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

Psalm 90:11-17

Hebrews 4:12-16

Mark 10:17-31

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Go and sell everything you own and follow me."

Today's Gospel is about God's call to us, and our response to God's call.

Jesus is not usually an easy person to refuse.

He called Peter from his nets, Matthew from his tax office, Zaccheus from his treetop perch, and Nathanael from his retreat. They all left everything behind: their jobs; their homes; and even their families to follow him, or to invite him to come to dinner at their place. They gave the very special young rabbi from Galilee themselves with all the gifts and talents (and faults and warts) that they had.

But something very strange happens in today's reading from Mark's Gospel. In fact, it is the **ONLY** time recorded in scripture when this happens. Jesus invites a rich young man who runs up to kneel at his feet and ask what he must **DO** to inherit eternal life to "come and follow" him, and he **DOESN'T** follow!

Instead of jumping up immediately to follow Jesus as the disciples did, Mark tells us that THIS man was "shocked" and went away grieving, because he had "many possessions." He said "no" to Jesus, even though it made him sad to do it, because he had a lot of stuff!

When I read this story, I see in my mind's eye Jesus watching the rich young man walk away, then turning back to his disciples. "It would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle," he tells them, "than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

Goodness! Camels and needles! That IS quite an image! Take a look at the one inserted in your bulletin today!

Just think about that big animal, with its long legs and padded feet, big hump, and thick, curly eyelashes, trying to climb through the eye of a sharp needle, even the "not to scale" needle in the handout!

Camels famously complain noisily when their riders just ask them to kneel down so they can get off, or load something on. They complain just as loudly when their riders ask them to get back up! What, I wonder, WOULD it sound like if the riders were trying to get them threaded through a needle!

It was commonly thought in Jesus' time that riches were a sign of God's favor. No wonder the rich young man was shocked by Jesus' request! That image worried the disciples. My goodness, they wondered, if the rich young man can't get into God's kingdom, what about the rest of us?

Does EVERYBODY have to sell EVERYTHING to get into heaven?

I don't think so.

Our reading from Hebrews today tells us two really important things.

First, that God knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows us, and his Word can be sharper than a two-edged sword, piercing to judge the very thoughts and intentions of our hearts. Oh boy - maybe we ARE in trouble!

Or ARE we? Second, Paul reassures us that Jesus, our great high priest, can sympathize with our weaknesses. He knows what a test feels like, because he has been tested as we are. The difference, of course, is that he always resisted the tests, and remained without sin. But he knows that we sometimes struggle to follow him. And, he knows what our gifts are!

Today's Gospel really is about God's call to us, and our response to God's call.

All through our lives Jesus calls us.

He calls us first in baptism, and whether we always obey his voice or not, he generously keeps on calling us.

He calls us to express our love for God in eagerness to do good for others.

He calls us to repent when we fall into sin.

He calls us to put people and their needs before the satisfaction that comes from owning lots of stuff.

He calls us to use our gifts to serve others in his name.

The rich young man asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Today, our question is the same - "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

One of my favorite preaching resources is Eleonore Stump, a professor at St. Louis University. She answers our question this way:

"If selling all he has and giving it to the poor is what the rich young man needs to do to inherit eternal life, what about everybody else? Does *everybody* have to sell what he has to attain heaven? If you don't sell everything you have, are you going to hell?"

The solution to the puzzle is to think about the description of the man asking Jesus the question: he is the *rich* young man. In other words, his gifts lie in his wealth.

Now gifts are highly various. There are lots of gifts, gifts of learning, of music, of many other things. But whatever a person's gifts are, they are meant to be given back in service to the Lord. You cannot bury your talent - your gifts - in the ground and hope to please the Lord.

So here is what you need to do to inherit eternal life: You need to follow Jesus and use your gifts to the full when you do."

So, here is what you need to do to inherit eternal life. You need to follow Jesus and use your gifts to the full when you do!

God's call to us isn't about camels and needles, thank goodness! It IS about knowing and making right use of the gifts he has given us!

Amen.

