

CAMELS AND NEEDLES

JOB 23: 1-9, 16-17; MARK 10: 17-31

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University Church of Chicago

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A survey was taken last week to determine the most annoying phrases or words in the English language, those colloquialisms that most of us use in everyday conversation. For example, how many meetings have you sat through in which some self-satisfied pundit has used the phrase, “at the end of the day...” to sum up a position or to make sure that the conversation has ended about a particular issue. “At the end of the day” is the fourth most annoying phrase. In third place comes a similar pronouncement: “it is what it is.” When somebody doesn’t want to discuss a matter, doesn’t that phrase, “it is what it is,” get under your skin. The second most annoying phrase—and the most commonly used to the point of exhaustion is “you know.” I think “you know” has become a verbal tic for many people. Don’t you sometimes find yourself counting how many times a person inserts “you know” into a conversation?

In first place the word that most annoys Americans is the dismissive “whatever.” That one makes our blood boil because when someone says “whatever...” that person is not only closing the door to further conversation or discussion but is doing it in a way that seems to imply that nothing more needs to be said. Case closed. Done. Leave me alone.

Whenever I read the story of the wealthy man’s encounter with Jesus, I fantasize that he walks away saying, “Whatever.” Matthew calls the man “young” and Luke says that he was a “ruler.” So, like the Christmas and Easter stories which we have amalgamated into one narrative, we call the man “the rich young ruler.” Mark just calls him a “man.” He represents you and me. He had “great possessions.” So do we when we are compared to the vast majority of the world’s inhabitants—even the vast majority of Chicagoans.

As Jesus is setting out on a journey, a man runs up and kneels down before him. He is obviously sincere. He kneels down. He addresses Jesus as “Good Teacher” and he asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” By dismissing the adjective “good” to describe himself, Jesus diverts attention away from himself onto God’s goodness. Then he makes a crisp reply that links eternal life to God’s reign. He reminds the man of the fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth of the Ten Commandments, and supplements them with a prohibition against fraud. The Torah is affirmed.

The man replies that he is a lifelong, observant Jew. Jesus looks the man in the eye, loves him and says, “You lack one thing: go and sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then, come, follow me.”

You’ve heard this story a hundred times, haven’t you? And preachers are so thankful that the compilers of the ecumenical lectionary have placed it in October, just as we are beginning to think about the

annual fall stewardship campaign. We can really come down on our parishioners, make them feel guilty and implore them about being so rich and indifferent and hard-hearted and penurious. And in the process both the preacher and the listener can miss the point of the story.

Notice the question the man asks: “What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?” Rather than relying on God’s grace and receiving the reign of God in complete dependence as a little child, the rich man wants to know what he can *do* to inherit eternal life. Well, there’s not much one can do to gain an inheritance. It’s something that’s given to a person. But Jesus gives the man something to do. “Sell what you own and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me.”

Jesus seems to confirm the man’s orientation toward action by simply requiring an action that is more extreme than obeying the commandments. It’s no wonder that the man turns away and possibly mutters, “Whatever.” Facing this new demand, the man goes away shocked and grieving.

Then Jesus turns to the disciples and comments: “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” After watching this improbable encounter between Jesus and the man, then hearing this comment, it’s no wonder that Mark declares that “the disciples were perplexed.” But, wait! We’re not through. “Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God. 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.’”

Well, that leaves me out of God’s reign. While I am far from rich, by the fact of savings and my salary from University Church I rank—as do most of you—among the top tiers of wealthy people in the world. Simply by being American middle-class.

I am like the Twelve who “were greatly astounded” by Jesus’ declaration and asked, “Who then can be saved?”

Well, Jesus says in effect, don’t worry about it. With mortals it’s impossible. But with God’s grace all things are possible. Whew! I was pretty scared there for a minute. But grace and judgment are inextricably bound together. The church’s weakness, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminded us is that it preaches “cheap grace: forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without contrition. Grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”

Does it all depend on grace? That’s what I have preached out of my own fears as well as my hopes and interpretation of Scripture all these years. I remember a discussion with my friend and colleague John Reist when he and I served on the faculty of North Central College. Is grace universal, I asked, and will everyone eventually be admitted to the Great Banquet? When I confronted him with the question, “Well, John, do you believe in universal salvation?” He replied, “Believe in it? Man, I’m depending on it!”

What then is the relationship between faith and reward—or virtue and wealth? Why must this man give up his riches in order to follow Jesus? The standard answer—and the one we want to believe—is that there is nothing wrong with wealth itself. The problem is not wealth per se but our attitude toward it. As

we accumulate riches, we are tempted to trust in our possessions and our powers of acquiring them rather than putting our trust in God's grace and providence. Even honestly acquired and generously shared wealth can lead to pride. This is why it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. It is very, very hard for us to let go of the immediate basis of our security and comfort—and the more we have, the harder it gets.

Clarence Jordan, that great Southern social prophet, visited an integrated church in the Deep South in the early sixties. Jordan was surprised to find a relatively large church so thoroughly integrated, not only black and white but also rich and poor. Jordan asked the old country preacher, "How did you get the church this way?"

"What way?" the preacher asked. Jordan went on to explain his surprise at finding a church so integrated, and in the South, too.

The preacher said, "Well, when our preacher left our small church, I went to the deacons and said, 'I'll be the preacher.' The first Sunday as preacher I opened the book and read, 'As many of you as has been baptized into Jesus has put on Jesus and there is no longer any Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, males or females, because you all is one in Jesus.' Then I closed the book and I said, 'If you are one with Jesus, you are one with all kinds of folks. And you ain't, well, you ain't.'"

Jordan asked what happened after that. "Well," the preacher said, "the deacons took me into the back room and they told me they didn't want to hear that kind of preaching no more."

Jordan asked what he did then. "I fired them deacons," the preacher roared.

"Then what happened?"

"Well," said the old hillbilly preacher, "I preached that church down to four people. Not long after that it started growing. And it grew. And I found out that revival sometimes don't mean bringin' people in but getting' people out that don't dare to love Jesus."

In addition to some of you who have complained that we have too much Scripture in the worship services (I wonder how much is "too much" when the lectionary outlines four lessons for each Sunday and we usually read only two), now some of you are asking why we have roped off the three back rows on the north end of the sanctuary. Well, we wanted to bring everybody toward the Communion Table with a sense of surrounding it.

Peter Marshall preached a famous sermon sixty years ago entitled "Balcony Christians." There is a sense in which one is removed from the action, when one is a spectator, the desire to remain a neutral observer is a sin. That's what is going on between the rich man and Jesus. The man wants his good life ratified; he has done the right things all his life, he's a good person and he has been able to detach himself from true discipleship.

We understand that man, don't we? Life is so hectic, so many demands are made on us, we are so uncertain about right and wrong in this current moral climate that we, too, want to be spectators. It's easier. There is a minimal risk. Spectators hardly ever get criticized.

We love to ask God questions to which we know we are not going to receive answers. Questions about suffering and God's will. But if we do that, we like Job had better be prepared for God's divine but ironic questions to us. "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Who stretched the line upon it?" Questions that boil down to one: "Who's in charge here?"

Kierkegaard told the story of a Greek philosopher who was asked to define religion. He asked for time to prepare an answer; when the agreed period had elapsed, he asked for another postponement. He kept asking for postponements. In this way he wished to express symbolically that he regarded the question as unanswerable. "This was genuinely in the Greek spirit, beautiful and ingenious. But if he had argued with himself, that since it was so long that he had left the question unanswered, he must now have come nearer to the answer, this would have been a misunderstanding."

The very meaning of existence is to be under constant examination. God, says, Kierkegaard, is actually amused by the leaping and surging and twisting of the millions of people who try to get hold of truth without having to suffer. It is impossible to relate to truth without suffering. We come, all of us and every one of us, to that significant moment and its decisiveness when matters of your own life and its future shape are concerned. Like the man who meets Jesus, we have to face up to the demands of discipleship.

W. H. Auden in his classic *For the Time Being* wrote about it like this:

. . . we are afraid

Of pain but more afraid of silence; for no nightmare

Of hostile objects could be as terrible as this void.

This is the Abomination. This is the Wrath of God.

Job and the man who meets Jesus have something in common with us. We are confronted with questions not only about what's important in our lives but also about our propensity for arrogance, our conviction that we know better even than God what we can and cannot do. The truth is that we do not know and cannot know the answers to all things and to think otherwise is arrogance and a form of idolatry. Like Job and the man who cannot follow because he is too rich, we are cross-examined.

Someone asked Coretta Scott King where she got the dream that kept her going. She responded, "It was while I was attending Antioch College. I heard a quotation that deeply motivated me. Horace Mann said to his first graduating class of Antioch in the late 1850s, 'Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.'"

Archbishop Desmond Tutu used to declare to his friends in South Africa during the worst days of apartheid: "Don't be discouraged. I've read the Book through to the end! It says that we will win! We will be victorious!"