

When Your Mercedes Bends
Mark 10:21-31
NUCC Traditional
14 October 2018

*PRAY

The Publishers Clearing House Prize Patrol has offered a \$10,000,000 Prize. A recent email read, "Want a six-figure second income? Get rich now!" Or of course, the constant reminder that there is a rich prince living on another continent that wants to simply give me \$8M if I'll just send my routing and checking account numbers.

The man in our scripture reading today also seemed to realize that being rich was about more than money. His story appears here in the gospel of Mark and in two other gospel accounts. Each time he is described as a man with many possessions, a man who was wealthy. The gospel of Matthew adds the detail that he was a young man. The gospel of Luke calls him a ruler. But even with all his riches, with all his vigor and youth, with all his good standing as a leader in the community, this man wanted more. He wanted to be rich also in eternal life. He came to Jesus with his question: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

It was an awkward meeting at best. Jesus was just starting out on another journey, when this stranger ran up, knelt at his feet, and blurted out his question. There was no proper introduction. There was too much flattery that Jesus tried to dismiss: "Why did you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Besides, in the first century, for one devout Jew talking to another, the answer would have been obvious. If you're interested in eternal life, then you need to start with the commandments.

Jesus listed a few of them, not all of the Ten Commandments, but a good half of them: "You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall

not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and mother." To this, the young man immediately responded, "Teacher, I have kept all of these."

It might sound arrogant to us, but maybe he was right. Maybe he really had kept all of the commandments. Jesus certainly didn't argue with him on that point.

Instead, Jesus looked at the young man said, "You lack one thing." The gospel of Mark adds this touching detail that doesn't appear in the other two versions of this story.

Jesus loved this stranger - who interrupted the start of his journey, who was rich and arrogant and more than a little self-righteous, and who was lacking just one thing.

And that one thing? "Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor." This was likely in the ancient world that tended to equate being rich with being blessed by God, and I don't think things have changed that much, have they?

In the early Hebrew tradition, wealthy people were the ones who could spend time reading the scriptures and praying. In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye sings, "If I were a rich man, I'd have the time that I lack, to sit in the synagogue and pray, and maybe have a seat by the eastern wall, and I'd discuss the learned books with the holy men, seven hours every day, and that would be the sweetest thing of all."

It's shocking even when compared to other calls of discipleship in scripture. In most cases, Jesus simply said "Follow me." He did not ask Peter and Andrew, James and John to sell their boats. Martha and Mary were homeowners. Wealthy women gave to support Jesus' ministry. Rich people like Lydia hosted house churches.

But in this particular case, Jesus said, "Sell everything you have and give to the poor," and then part 2: "Come, follow me." When the man heard this, "He was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions."

This young man could have kept the commandments -- or at least he thought he could keep them. But Jesus' words shone like a spotlight on what appears to be his deepest spiritual challenge: **it wasn't that he owned a lot of things, but that his things owned him.**

Then Jesus responds in a way that has been misused and misunderstood for millennia. "How hard it will be for those who have wealth 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."

Camels are big animals. They can be easily seven feet tall and weigh up to 1,500 pounds. So, Jesus' description of a camel fitting through the eye of a needle is laughable and impossible; so impossible that some have tried to re-interpret his words. After all, the Greek word for a thick rope is very similar to the Greek word for camel. So maybe Jesus meant to say, it would be easier for a thick rope to get through the eye of a needle. But that would also be impossible!

However, there is also a belief that that the eye of a needle was actually a reference to a very low gate in a city wall where a camel would have to be unloaded and crawl through the opening to get through. That wouldn't be easy either - unloading the camel would be like a rich person unloading their wealth. It would be an acknowledgement that while they may own a lot of things, their things don't own them.

It's like the man who put the following announcement in his community's newsletter: "LOST: a black leather wallet containing precious family photos, personal ID documents, and \$875. Finder can keep the photos and documents but please return the money, to which I am attached for sentimental reasons."

However, we understand it, the camel and the eye of the needle is exaggerated language to make a point. A camel can't fit through the eye of a needle. A thick rope can't fit through the eye of a needle. A camel can't get through a low city gate without unloading its cargo first.

And while I am not particularly interested in conversations about exclusivity and who gets into Heaven and who doesn't, what I am passionate about are conversations about generosity and abundance. About "to whom much is given, of them much is expected." I am interested in engaging in conversations about how Jesus tells us that our stuff shouldn't own us. Not because I think Jesus thought that people who own stuff, even a lot of stuff, won't get into Heaven, but because Jesus knew that if we lived trying to own more and more our lives would not be as rich as they could be.

There is universality in this story. Whether this man was actually young, or actually a ruler, or actually had that kind of immense wealth, we will never know. But we know that fateful day when Jesus looked at him, loved him and said: "You lack one thing..." That person's life, faith, and maybe even their Mercedes, began to bend in ways that we can't imagine.

I was struck this week when I read in the New York Times that Matthew Shepherd's remains will be interred at The National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. later this month. Matthew was killed in 1998 after a brutal attack in his beloved Laramie, Wyoming. While a tragedy, Matthew's death is also credited with a modern awakening of awareness of hate crimes against gay & lesbian people. I will never forget that the attack occurred on my 20th birthday and had a profound impact on me as a closeted gay man.

What I didn't know, however, was that Matthew's cremains have never been interred, buried. His parents worried that if they did bury his ashes somewhere public there would be a great risk of desecration of his grave. And so, he will be buried among the likes of President Woodrow Wilson, Admiral George Dewey of the United States Navy, Helen Keller and her teacher, Anne Sullivan. Matthew's father, Dennis Shepard, said the family was "awe-struck" by the others resting at the cathedral. "To have Matthew sharing a facility with people like that is above and beyond what we ever expected," he said.

Perhaps a family's chapter of grief closes later this month. Perhaps some of their belief that they had been turned away by God or by the church can be rectified when their beloved son is laid to rest.

And just as the rich, young ruler felt turned away that day, and maybe you have felt that before too, there is redeeming power in our sacred text. There are stories that say: "You are enough" and "You are beloved" and "You are created in love." My prayer is that our souls will be open to hearing these truths, and that our hearts can reach out and sing with deep fervor: "Precious Lord, take my hand..."