

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario

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The Eye of the Needle

‘WHEN THE RICH MAN HEARD THIS, HE WAS SHOCKED AND WENT AWAY GRIEVING, FOR HE HAD MANY POSSESSIONS. THEN JESUS LOOKED AROUND AND SAID TO HIS DISCIPLES, ‘HOW HARD IT WILL BE FOR THOSE WHO HAVE WEALTH TO ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD!’

MOST OF US KNOW THIS STORY OF THE RICH, YOUNG RULER WHICH APPEARS IN THREE OF THE FOUR GOSPELS—MATTHEW, MARK AND LUKE AND **THE FACT** THAT HE SHOWS UP IN **ALL** THREE GOSPELS IS A PRETTY GOOD INDICATION THAT HIS STORY IS TRUE. PERHAPS WE **WISH** HE HAD NOT SHOWN UP AT **ALL** BECAUSE THIS PASSAGE **TESTS** OUR COMFORT LEVEL NOT ONLY WITH *WHO CAN GET INTO HEAVEN* BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY *‘HOW CAN WE GET INTO HEAVEN’*.

MAYBE WE COULD BE LIKE THOMAS JEFFERSON, THE 3ND PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES WHO CUT AND PASTED NEW TESTAMENT PASSAGES. HE DID NOT ALWAYS AGREE WITH THE ANCIENT SCRIBES’ INTERPRETATIONS, SO HE CREATED HIS OWN GOSPEL BY TAKING HIS PENKNIFE TO EXISTING COPIES OF THE NEW TESTAMENT --- CUTTING THIS AND PASTING THAT TO MAKE UP HIS OWN ACCOUNT OF CHRIST’S LIFE AND MORALS. I WONDER WHAT VERSES JEFFERSON KEPT FROM THIS PASSAGE. COULD IT HAVE BEEN THE UNHAPPY MAN LEAVING; THE SILLINESS OF THE CAMEL SNORTING AND HUFFING AT THE NEEDLE’S EYE; THE DISCIPLES FREAKING OUT, OR MAYBE THE FACT THAT GOD ALONE CAN GET US THROUGH THE TOUGHEST OBSTACLES. THIS STORY FOR CHRISTIANS IS ONE OF THE HARDEST IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, ONE THAT STRIKES FEAR IN OUR HEARTS.

BUT WHY FEAR.

DO WE BELIEVE THIS PASSAGE DEMANDS SOMETHING MORE THAN WE CAN UNDERTAKE?

LIKE THE RICH MAN WE COME SEEKING ETERNAL LIFE; A REWARD FOR BEING A GOOD AND FAITHFUL PERSON BUT WE HAVE **NO IDEA** HOW TO OBTAIN IT UNLESS IT INVOLVES PURCHASING IT WITH OUR RESOURCES.

JESUS DOES NOT BUY INTO THIS DISCERNMENT. INSTEAD HE JOLTS THE MAN FROM HIS ‘WHAT MUST I DO’ BEHAVIOUR AND ASKS HIM WHERE HIS HEART IS INSTEAD. ‘DO YOU TRULY FOLLOW GOD’S COMMANDMENTS AND RESPECT YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER?’

JESUS CAN TELL HE HAS A FAITHFUL MAN BEFORE HIM BUT STILL HE LACKS **ONE THING**. THIS MAN IS **SEEKING** A PLACE AT GOD’S BANQUET TABLE WITH HIS OWN RESOURCES BY DOING SOMETHING WITHIN HIS OWN POWER.

GO, SELL WHATEVER YOU OWN, AND GIVE THE MONEY TO THE POOR, AND ALL YOUR WEALTH WILL BE HEAVENLY WEALTH. THEN COME FOLLOW ME.

I DON’T KNOW ABOUT YOU, BUT THIS IS WHERE JEFFERSON’S EDITING OF SCRIPTURE MIGHT WORK.

CUT IT HERE, SNIP IT THERE AND PASTE.

WHAT JESUS SAYS TO THE MAN IS A REALITY CHECK FOR US. WE WANT TO GO TO HEAVEN, BUT WE DON'T WANT TO BE **POOR** TO DO IT.

WHAT MUST WE DO TO GET INTO HEAVEN?

THE STORY OF THE RICH MAN IS NOT FAR FROM OUR HEARTS AND MINDS. PEOPLE TODAY STILL ASK THE QUESTION BECAUSE WE WANT TO FIND SOME COMFORT IN KNOWING THERE IS A WAY TO GET TO HEAVEN AND BE WITH GOD.

A WEALTHY MAN RAN UP TO MOTHER TERESA AND SAID, *'I HAVE LOTS OF MONEY.'* 'I DON'T NEED YOUR MONEY.' SAID MOTHER TERESA. THE MAN WOULD NOT GIVE UP THAT EASILY. *'BUT, I WANT TO DO SOMETHING! I HAVE A BIG HOUSE. DO YOU WANT ME TO GIVE IT UP? I HAVE A BIG CAR; DO YOU WANT ME TO GIVE THAT UP INSTEAD?'* MOTHER TERESA LOOKED INTO HIS EYES AND SAID, 'NO'. I WANT YOU TO GO BACK HOME AND WITH THAT BIG CAR OF YOURS, I WANT YOU TO BRING 'POOR PEOPLE TO YOUR BIG HOUSE SO THAT THEY MAY ENJOY A FEW HOURS IN YOUR BEAUTIFUL HOME AND WHEN YOU GO TO THE STORE TO BUY A NEW SUIT OR SOME CLOTHING, INSTEAD OF BUYING THE BEST THAT YOU CAN AFFORD, I WANT YOU TO SPEND LESS ON YOURSELF AND USE THAT PART YOU SAVED TO BUY SOMETHING FOR SOMEONE ELSE OR BETTER STILL, **FOR THE POOR.**' THE MAN LOOKED AMAZED AND SAID, *MOTHER TERESA, IS THAT ALL YOU WANT OF ME? I NEVER THOUGHT OF IT THAT WAY!*

I WONDER IF WE HAVE THOUGHT ABOUT OUR TEXT THIS WAY. I WONDER IF IT BRINGS US SOME COMFORT KNOWING THAT **JESUS LOVES US**.

SO, BREATHE DEEPLY AND PUT A SMILE ON YOUR FACE. BECAUSE RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THIS **TESTY** PASSAGE JESUS THROWS ANOTHER LOOP AROUND US TO REIN US IN.

A CAMEL. THAT'S RIGHT. A CAMEL. A 2000-POUND ANIMALISTIC EXAGGERATION WAY OUT OF PROPORTIONS TO FIT THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE.

OF COURSE, THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE. THAT CAMEL IS NOT GOING THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE ON ITS OWN ANY MORE THEN WE CAN.

IN ARAMAIC JESUS' LANGUAGE 'CAMEL' HAS A DOUBLE MEANING REFERRING TO CAMEL OR ROPE.

DURING JESUS'S DAY WHEN AN INDIVIDUAL FORMED AN EASY AND QUICK FRIENDSHIP HE WOULD SAY THAT WHEN THEY **MET** IT WAS LIKE A NEEDLE AND THREAD, BUT IF THAT RELATIONSHIP DID NOT HAVE AN EASY START AND THEY HAD DIFFICULTY UNDERSTANDING EACH OTHER THEY WOULD SAY THAT THEIR RELATIONSHIP WAS LIKE A ROPE PASSING THROUGH A NEEDLE.

THUS, A RICH MAN TO UNDERSTAND GOD IS LIKE A ROPE PASSING THROUGH A NEEDLE.

CAN WE TURN THIS ROPE INTO THREAD?

YES, BUT WE HAVE TO FIRST AND FOR MOST UNDERSTAND THAT GOD'S KINGDOM IS NOT FOR SALE. THE POOR CAN NOT BUY IT WITH THEIR POVERTY **NOR** CAN THE RICH BUY IT WITH THEIR

POSSESSIONS AND WITHOUT GOD'S GIFT OF GRACE AND HOPE PASSING THROUGH ANYTHING WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE.

WE HAVE TO BE FREE TO RECEIVE GOD'S GIFT. WE CANNOT ACCEPT GOD'S GIFT IF OUR HANDS ARE NOT FREE TO TAKE IT;

WE CAN NOT MAKE ROOM FOR IT... IF OUR HEARTS ARE FULL OF WANTS.

WE CANNOT FOLLOW.... IF WE ARE NOT FREE TO GO.

THAT IS THE REASON WHY THE RICH PERSON WENT AWAY UNHAPPY AND GRIEFING. HE WAS NOT FREE TO ACCEPT GOD'S GIFT. HE WAS BUSY COLLECTING TREASURES OF EARTH NOT REALIZING THESE TREASURES HAVE NO USE TO GOD.

HE BELIEVED HIS WEALTH WOULD MAKE HIM FREE, BUT HE REALIZED AS HE KNELT BEFORE JESUS THAT THAT WAS NOT SO. HE IS THE ONLY PERSON IN THE *GOSPEL OF MARK* WHO **DECLINED** AN INVITATION TO FOLLOW. HIS GREAT POSSESSIONS **DRAGGED** BEHIND HIM LIKE A BALL AND CHAIN AND HE DECLINED TO BE HEALED.

POVERTY SCARED HIM MORE THAN BONDAGE TO POSSESSIONS. HE COULD NOT BELIEVE THAT THE OPPOSITE OF RICH MIGHT NOT BE POOR..... **BUT FREE**.

AND WHEN THE DISCIPLES HEARD THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE STORY, THEY SAID THE WORDS OUT LOUD THAT WE ARE THINKING WITH OUR INSIDE VOICES, 'WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE SAVED'?

WE KNOW THAT TWO OF THEM HAD LEFT THEIR FISHING NETS BEHIND, TWO MORE OF THEM LEFT A BOAT NOT TO MENTION THEIR FATHER; ANOTHER ONE LEFT A LUCRATIVE CAREER COLLECTING TAXES. ALL OF THEM WALKED AWAY FROM SOMETHING **BUT NOT BECAUSE** IT WAS A QUALIFICATION TO DISCIPLESHIP.

JESUS CALLED-- THEY FOLLOWED, AND **STUFF** GOT LEFT BEHIND. NOT BECAUSE IT WAS BAD, WEALTH IN JEWISH CULTURE **WAS A SIGN OF GOD'S BLESSING**; BUT BECAUSE THE **STUFF WAS IN THE WAY TO FOLLOW**. AND YOU CANNOT LUG AROUND **2000 POUNDS OF STUFF** IF YOU WANT TO BE FREE.

THEY LEFT EVERYTHING BEHIND--- HUMAN ACHIEVEMENTS AND HUMAN FAILURES.

WITHOUT GOD WE ARE NOTHING. WE MIGHT BE THE GRAIN OF SALT, BUT GOD ADDS THE FLAVOUR THAT MATTERS.

AND THAT IS TRUE WITH ENTERING GOD'S KINGDOM, WE HAVE NO POWER TO ENTRY ON OUR OWN.

WE AUTOMATICALLY ASSUME THE RICH MAN HAD MONEY, BUT THE ARAMAIC MEANING REFERS TO ONE WHO HAS AN ABUNDANCE OF RESOURCES TO PULL ONE THROUGH A DIFFUCULT SITUATION.

SO, BACK TO THIS RISKY BUSINESS OF WHO CAN BE SAVED?

THE QUESTION HAS NOT CHANGED MUCH **BUT NEITHER HAS THE ANSWER.**

WE CANNOT LOVE OUR POSSESSIONS MORE THAN LOVING GOD'S TREASURES OF HEAVEN.

TREASURES OF HEAVEN CAN BE FOUND RIGHT HERE AMONG US.

WE NEED TO BE RENEWED FROM WITHIN. WEALTH OF INSIGHT, WEALTH OF COMPASSION.

WE NEED OUR HEARTS TO BE FREE OF WANTS.

WE NEED TO **DO ORDINARY THINGS** WITH **EXTRAORDINARY LOVE.**

IT IS NOT ONLY **WHAT WE DO**, BUT HOW MUCH LOVE WE PUT IN THE **DOING.**

EVEN WHEN WE HAVE NO VALUABLE THINGS TO GIVE AWAY,

WE CAN BE THE LIVING **PRESENCE OF GOD'S KINDNESS.**

KINDNESS IN OUR FACES

KINDNESS IN OUR EYES

KINDNESS IN OUR SMILE,

KINDNESS IN OUR WARM GREETING

KINDNESS IN OUR HUGS

WE ARE THE LIGHT OF GOD'S TREASURES.

SO HOW DO WE GET THROUGH THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE?

PUT GOD FIRST. PUT OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD BEFORE EVERYTHING ELSE.

GOD ALONE CAN GET US THROUGH THE TOUGHEST OBSTACLES ESPECIALLY TODAY WHEN THE WORLD IS AT **ODDS** WITH OUR FATH. LOOK HOW EASILY THESE MESSAGES OF THE WORLD SNEAK INTO OUR DAILY LIVES.....MORE IS BETTER. DON'T PUT LOVE FIRST, PUT YOURSELF FIRST.

TAKE TIME TO SEEK JESUS IN THE MIDST OF THE WORLD'S PROFANE MESSAGES THEN YOU WILL FIND HEAVENLY TREASURES.

IT'S HARD TO ENTER THE KINGDOM, AND IF YOU'RE RICH AND GREAT, YOU'RE LIKE A HEAVY-LOADED BEAST STUCK IN A NARROW GATE.

THEN PETER SAYS TO JESUS,' YOU FRIGHTEN ME TO DEATH---I'VE LEFT MY HOME AND EVERYTHING, AND I HAVE NOTHING LEFT.

IT'S HARD TO ENTER THE KINGDOM, YOU KNOW THAT I HAVE TRIED, BUT AT THE END, WHEN YOU JESUS GO THROUGH, WILL I BE LEFT OUTSIDE?

OH, PETER, PETER, JESUS SAID, 'WHAT WILL I DO WITH YOU?

I TOLD YOU: GOD WILL GET YOU THERE IF HE HAS TO DRAG YOU THROUGH.'

(BARE FEET AND BUTTERCUPS; RODDY COWIE)