

Introductory

This text has parallels in Matthew (19: 23ff) and Luke (18: 224ff). Neither this text, nor any of those texts are appointed to be read in the TLH one-year lectionary. In LW, Mark 10: 17-27 (28-30) is the text appointed for Pentecost 21B, notably leaving off “the first shall be last and the last first.” The Matthew and Luke texts are absent from the three-year series in LW and LSB.

I will probably reference the monastic movement on Sunday. It began early with the Christians, it continued for several hundreds of years, and monasteries and convents were very much a part of society during the time of Christendom. I can’t find where Luther had much good to say about the monastery, and he criticized them on several points, and he should know, shouldn’t he?

I don’t doubt that Luther knew what he was talking about, but it cannot be denied that the religious houses were overall a positive thing and performed many useful and even essential functions that greatly benefited the society. Medical care, care of the poor, infirm, and aged, feeding the hungry, care of orphans and widows, were some of the acts of Christian mercy done through monasteries.

Whatever education took place generally happened within their context, and they served as an outlet for too many children – the Medieval method of population control. The people who served in that way did what Jesus told the rich man to do last week; their vow of poverty meant that they left behind all the things mentioned today by Jesus and Peter, even the clothing on their backs.

They also inherited land and the like and did what you do with land; they raised crops and livestock – it’s where they got food for themselves and others – and made money, and I noted in last week’s sermon that you can’t give away what you don’t have, and much of what they had they gave away. Henry VII dissolved them all and confiscated their property and who would do those acts of mercy?

The Irish Potato Famine (1840s) was bad, made worse because the government (England) had taken over from the Church the responsibility to feed the poor, and they weren’t very good at it. Look at our own country, where the government and secular institutions have taken over those acts of mercy. The Church did it better. Hospitals and nursing homes have changed in recent years.

We stayed at Luther’s Erfurt Monastery three years ago. It’s used for a meeting place, and they put up guests like us. The Elector gave The Augustinian Monastery in Wittenberg to Luther, and he and Katie lived and raised their family there. Then it was made into a boarding house, and now it’s the Lutherhaus, a must-see on the Luther trail, and we spent half a day there during our trip.

By now, the monastic movement has pretty much petered out. By that, I mean that what was once the beating heart of a community is now almost nowhere to be found. The French Revolution took out most of their religious houses, and the World Wars killed the last of them in Germany and other European countries. But mostly, people just don't want to take those three vows anymore.

And we have moved on.

Textual Notes

23. Mark tells that “περιβλεψάμενος ὁ Ἰησοῦς – Jesus looked around,” and observes that the rich young man “went away, sorrowful, for he had many possessions.” But as He looked around, He saw that other people were there, and “ὁ Ἰησοῦς λέγει τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ - and Jesus speaks to His disciples,” the word used in the NT to identify Christians who are eager to be taught by Him.

He says to these Christians, “Πῶς δυσκόλως οἱ τὰ χρήματα ἔχοντες εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ Θεοῦ εἰσελεύσονται – how difficult for those having riches to enter into the Kingdom of God,” to become and remain a Christian, and it's true. I don't know if you notice things like this, but riches are a tremendous distraction and can be a powerful temptation to reject or to abandon The Faith.

Riches take many different forms. When we think of “riches” or “possessions,” we generally think of assets, mostly money. Things like popularity, various gifts and talents, fame, and having a lot of women are some of the other things that can distract a person from The Faith, and the more you have, the greater the distraction. How many Christians went to Hollywood and lost their faith?

Personally, we never had anything. I brought a car to the marriage, and she brought a horse, and the former was used to buy furniture and the latter to purchase major appliances. After seminary, we didn't have a pot or a window to throw it out, and we lived in other peoples' houses. She got a degree, went to work, we paid a lot of Lutheran tuition, and started living in our own houses.

I started having to think about things like maintenance on the house and now we have a few acres, and it's always something. When we had nothing, I didn't pay any attention to my investments. Now, I have an app on the phone. and I try to limit myself to checking on my things at the end of the day, but it's pretty easy to peek, and anyway where are we going to leave it all when we die?

The response of the Rich Young Ruler to Jesus' invitation to him to a rare opportunity to apostleship is on His mind when He says here what He says here. However, we ought not to get the idea that the man's eschewing of The Apostolic Office somehow rendered him ineligible to be a Christian. Who would ever say that such is the case now, and no more was it the case then.

Coming off His blessing of the children, for whom entrance into the Kingdom is easy as falling off a log, it is just the opposite for the man with great riches. The adverb “δυσκόλως – hard” is

rare in the NT, occurring only here and in the two parallels, and it means doing something that is well-nigh impossible to do, like putting a round peg in a square hole that is too small for it.

Aristotle calls “χρήματα – riches” “all things of which the value is measured in coinage” (BCLY). It’s the same word used to describe the Rich Young Ruler’s “possessions” or “assets.” The more things, it seems, the more distractions from those things. Distractions are what keep people out of Divine Service, away from Word and Sacrament, which can kill you, spiritually speaking.

Another problem with having things is that the more things you have, the less you tend to think you need God. Poorer people have a more acute understanding of that need. Think of Israel for the entire period of the Judges, a seemingly never-ending cycle of trust, prosperity, apathy towards God, disaster, deliverance by God at the hand of a judge, and renewed prosperity, and repeat.

24. Upon hearing this, “οἱ δὲ μαθηταὶ ἐθαμβοῦντο ἐπὶ τοῖς λόγοις αὐτοῦ - His disciples were terrified at His words.” The verb is in the imperfect tense – they started to be terrified, and they kept it up – and it makes only two other appearances in the NT. In Mark (1:27), the word is used to describe the reaction of the crowd to Jesus’ first casting out of demons at Capernaum.

The other occurrence is later on here (32), right after they hit the road at the conclusion of this pericope. Luke uses the noun cognate of the verb three times (4:36, 5:9, Acts 3:10) to describe the response of people to things that are miraculous or supernatural, and many of these other uses of the noun are describing the emotional response to what we would call dramatic or traumatic events.

But what’s so traumatic about Jesus saying it’s hard for rich men to get into the Kingdom? In the NT, Jesus and later the Christian writers of the epistles manifest a higher regard for the poor than they do for the rich. Conventional scholarship teaches that the first Christians tended to be slaves, women, and poor people, and the rich were more likely than not to be the Church’s tormentor.

That scholarship is being challenged by the idea that the appeal of Christianity was broader than that, and that makes sense to me. It’s the same religion now as it was then, but I’m not sure I see it appealing more today to the downtrodden than to “rich” people. I know a lot of Christians who are free, who are men, and who have a lot of assets, and it’s probably harder for us than them.

Not only actors, but athletes, rock stars, and tech innovators have a lot of fame and money, and it costs a lot of their Christian religion. Having noted that, many of those same people are able to retain their faith and some come to it after having gained riches. Many of their stories include the emptiness that comes with that and turning to Christianity for meaning in life – and salvation.

The idea of being shut out of heaven is a terrifying thing, especially if you dwell on the alternative. The way hell is described in the Bible is worse than anything you can ever experience in this life – and you can find plenty of terrible things here. No doubt this crowd of “disciples” included people who possessed various amounts of wealth, and the wealthiest were the most terrified.

The response of Jesus to their terror is “ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς πάλιν ἀποκριθεὶς λέγει αὐτοῖς Τέκνα, πῶς δύσκολόν ἐστιν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ Θεοῦ εἰσελθεῖν·- Jesus again responded, saying to them, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter into the Kingdom of God.’” The verb is translated “responded” because what He says is said in response to what they are feeling; that feeling of utter terror.

He comforts them in their terror by calling them His children, harkening back to earlier in this chapter and to how easy it is for the child to get into the Kingdom. Some of the manuscripts add “τοὺς πεποιθότας ἐπὶ χρήμασιν – those trusting riches,” which makes a lot of sense and is rather implied even without those words. KJV and many other translations also have those words.

It seems odd that there are no variant readings in the parallels from Matthew and Luke, and what does this mean? It means that several Mark copyists saw fit to add those clarifying words (“those trusting in riches”), and none of the other copyists did. Or it means that Mark copyists took those words out to make it conform to Matthew and Luke, or to condemn all rich men, not just some.

Or it means that we don’t know what it means. At any rate, the point Jesus is making to them, in response to their terror, is to call them children, and then repeat to them that it’s “δύσκολόν – hard” to enter the Kingdom of heaven. That’s the adjective cognate to the adverb we talked about earlier, and it speaks to the difficulty of putting the square peg that’s too big into the round hole.

25. Or putting a camel through the eye of a needle. The needle is not a new invention. The needle has been around for a long time; right after thread was invented, then came cloth, then the needle. While the material used to make the needle has changed over time – ours are mostly made of metal and maybe plastic - the design of the needle has remained fundamentally the same over time.

The saying used here by Jesus seems to be an adaptation of a common saying having to do with an elephant, rather than a camel, passing through the eye of a needle.

The Babylonian Talmud applies the aphorism to unthinkable thoughts. To explain that dreams reveal the thoughts of a man’s heart, the product of reason rather than the absence of it, the rabbis say; ‘They do not show a man a palm tree of gold, nor an elephant going through *the eye of a needle*.’ A Midrash on the Song of Songs uses the phrase to speak of God’s willingness and ability beyond comparison, to accomplish the salvation of a sinner: ‘The Holy One said, open for them a door as big as a needle’s eye and I will open for you a door though which may enter tents and (camels?)’ Rav Sheishet of Nehardea applies the same aphorism to the convoluted reasoning for which the sages of Pumbedita were evidently famous: “Are you from Pumbedita, where they push an elephant through the eye of a needle?” (Baba Metzia, 38b) (WIK).

Calling it a proverb, Bullinger (*Figures of Speech in the Bible*) states; “this was a proverbial expression for a thing very unusual and very difficult.” He then quotes Lightfoot quoting the same

verses mentioned in the WIK article, and we must conclude that Lightfoot is the true source for the assertion that “eye of a needle” was a common expression in the rabbinical thought of the day.

Lightfoot (as quoted in Bullinger) quotes the rabbinical gloss, “a thing which he was not wont to see, nor concerning which he had ever thought,” and then quotes another rabbinical saying about one “who can make an elephant pass through the eye of a needle” (759). And that’s probably enough – maybe that’s too much – on this saying whose meaning is abundantly obvious.

26. Which is met with more and increased astonishment; “οἱ δὲ περισσῶς ἐξεπλήσσοντο – they were exceedingly astonished.” The adverb is a not common intensifier, making only seventeen appearances in the NT, and the verb is even less common, being found thirteen times, and it has connotations of complete and utter inability to comprehend and maybe even a little bit of panic.

They seem to be completely at a loss to explain His perfectly clear words, which their words reveal that they understand completely; “λέγοντες πρὸς ἑαυτοὺς Καὶ τίς δύναται σωθῆναι – saying to each other ‘So, who can be saved?’” They don’t put their rhetorical query to Jesus, but discuss it among themselves, and they are panicking because it sounds like they are all headed for hell!

27. They seem to have glossed over His calling them “Children,” but they heard the Law, now they may be prepared to hear the Gospel, and He looks at them and says “Παρὰ ἀνθρώποις ἀδύνατον, ἀλλ’ οὐ παρὰ θεῷ· πάντα γὰρ δυνατὰ παρὰ τῷ θεῷ – with men, (it is) impossible, but not with God. All things (are) possible with God.” So, you’re saying there’s a chance.

The words commonly translated “impossible” and “possible” are the same word, except that the one (impossible) has that negator and the other (possible) does not. The word is usually translated “power,” and of the negative we might say “impotent.” Both words are absolutes, and when it comes to entering the Kingdom of Heaven, man has no power, and is utterly helpless to do that.

But (emphatically) what is impossible with man is absolutely possible with God, who has that power infinitely. The rich man especially is unable to save himself, given all his distractions, and it’s hard for the rich man to get into the Kingdom of Heaven, but God can save even that poor wretch, and if He can save even that poor wretch of a rich man, He can save well nigh anybody.

28. Cut away from “disciples” – the general term for a Christian – to that sub-group of Christian disciples known as Apostles, like Peter, who some think is the “spokesman” for the Twelve, and it’s verses like this that make them think that. Peter seems to want to return to self and remind Jesus of the great sacrifice he and they have made, and it doesn’t really flow in the conversation.

Harkening now back to the rich young man who was invited to a place at the apostolic table – he declined because he had a lot of assets, Peter points out to Jesus that they had done what he did not, “Ἴδου ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν πάντα καὶ ἠκολουθήκαμέν σοι – Behold, we have left all, and followed You.” The first verb in an aorist, the simple, one-time act of leaving their former lives behind.

The second verb is in the perfect tense, past action with results continuing. Indeed, the results of their simple act of heeding the call and following Him were continual; it really must have disrupted their lives to be pulled away so suddenly, dramatically and apparently completely. When Peter says what He says, Jesus does not disagree with or correct him; they did what Peter said they did.

Matthew (4:22) tells us that Peter and Andrew “Immediately, they left their nets and followed Him,” and of James and John (22), they “left the boat and their father” and followed Him. I have made the case that their fishing up in Galilee post-resurrection was an indication that at least one of them had not sold his boat, but you don’t have to own the boat to use the boat for fishing.

We might also conclude that Matthew the Tax Collector had money. Simon was a political junkie and “zealot” who worked to overthrow the Roman occupation, and may have killed people, but there’s really no money in that. As to the rest of the Twelve, and as to the Seventy Apostles, we don’t really have much information about their lives left behind upon becoming Apostles.

If we conclude that it must therefore not be important, we have also to conclude that the occupations of the fishermen and the tax collector were important, because they are mentioned in the Bible. We have spoken before about how precious space in the Bible is, given the cost of writing materials, and they take the time and space to tell us about the fishermen and their boats.

29. But apparently at least some of them were landowners. He responds to Peter’s claim of having left “everything” by listing some of the things that Apostles have given up to do what they do, house (or home), brothers and sisters, mothers and father, children and land. These sound like separate components, and those separate components generally make up a home and family.

Even today, for most Americans, the house is base camp for the family, the place where you naturally gather. Speaking of those who have left those things behind, He says, they have done not for self, but “ἐνεκεν ἐμοῦ καὶ ἐνεκεν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου – for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel.” People can and people do leave it all behind all the time for a lot of different things.

People can even leave it all behind for religious reasons that have nothing to do with the Christian religion, and they do. The caveat here is that you leave it all behind for the apostolic office – these days it means to go to Seminary – for Jesus and the Gospel, which grammatically stand in apposition to one another; Jesus is the Gospel, and the Gospel is Jesus. They are one in the same.

30. About that person and his loss, “ἐὰν μὴ λάβῃ ἑκατονταπλασίονα νῦν ἐν τῷ καιρῷ τούτῳ - should he not take a hundredfold in this time” all those things. Things he will get include houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, lands, all plural in number. The last thing you get is also plural, “μετὰ διωγμῶν – great persecutions,” literally “the *hunt* to bring someone down like an animal,”

31. Concluding with the familiar oxymoron about the first and the last, He underscores the difference in the way the world sees things as distinct from the way Christians see things. The

meaning of “first” and “last” is not in relation to time, but in relation to rank and importance. The way the world looks at rich and poor – and most things – is different from the way Christians do.

Law/Gospel

Rich and Poor

Impossible and Possible

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