

Text: Mark 10: 17-31  
Title: An Untamable Text  
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In the center of modern Jerusalem stands the Old City. That Old City is surrounded by a wall.  
A wall that stands 15 to 50 feet tall,  
that stretches about 3 miles long,  
that is 10 feet thick,  
that has turrets and towers ,  
that has been built, razed, and rebuilt multiple times,  
that has a side walk along the top on which you can circumnavigate the whole Old City.  
And, that wall has seven gates with distinctive colorful names: New Gate, Herod's Gate, Jaffa Gate, Dung Gate, Damascus Gate, Lions' Gate, and Zion Gate. There are four sealed gates, but those seven gates are open and they are the only way into the Old City...  
They are gates into a different age,  
gates to some of the world's most significant religious sites,  
gates into a maze of stone sidewalks and crowded bazaars,  
and a gate into the imagination of this morning's text.

Because...

The way it is told...

There was a gate into the city that was built too short and too narrow, so that when merchants arrived with their goods piled atop their camels they couldn't get through the gate. The large-lopey-dopey-doe-eyed-camels couldn't possibly fit through such a narrow stubby gate. They couldn't bend down low enough to squeeze through, nor could they couldn't crawl through on their camel knees with such heavy loads on their camel backs. It was impossible for a camel to go through the eye of the needle ~ gate.

Unless, unless....

Unless, the merchant first unburdened the camel, and then with the weight off the camel's back it could stoop down in such a way that it could enter in. It wasn't easy, but it could be done. You just to needed to shed some of the load and in humility enter in on bended knee.

Now, that is a rich and powerful image.

That is a dramatic lesson.

That is an easier reading of a hard saying.

That must be what Jesus meant ~ it is about the humility of your heart.

That is....

That is just not true.

The overwhelming consensus of biblical scholars is that no such gate ever existed. From as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century this colorful illustration has become standard fare for sermon and Sunday school, but there is no evidence of such a gate, nor is there any record of a reprimand for the architect who may have forgotten to make the gate deep and wide enough for a camel and rider to pass through unhindered.

And, variations on this theme about arched pathways on roads or narrow mountain passes all meet the same historical rigor. There is no evidence that Jesus was referring to a passage way that involved some ingenuity ~ setting aside, bowing down, unburdening. Jesus says that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God.

Fortunately the King James Version solves the dilemma and softens the demands. It reads:

*And Jesus looked round about, and saith unto his disciples, "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!"*

*And the disciples were astonished at his words. But Jesus answereth again, and saith unto them, "Children, how hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."*

Ah! That makes it easier. The issue is trust. If you trust in riches it will be hard to enter the kingdom of God. That is to say that it's not a matter of money, its matter of the heart, its matter of ultimate trust. Keep your money. In God we trust.....

But, there is another historical gloss here. The most reliable New Testament manuscripts don't include the phrase, "trust in riches." That was the addition of an ancient scribe who was trying to make the text more palatable.

Dear friends, there is a long history of biblical interpreters who have tried to take the sting out of this passage. One of my favorites is a theory that the word for camel was really a misprint of the word for rope ~ they are similar in Greek. As if the problem can be solved by reducing the ratio of the object to the opening. It is easier to run a rope through the eye of a needle than it is to wedge a camel through. You get the idea.

We have tried domesticate the text.

We have tried to tame the text.

We have tried to make it go down with a spoonful of sugar.

Because, surely Jesus didn't mean what he said.

It is a wonderfully impossible image. Jesus takes the largest animal of the region and the smallest commonly understood opening and invites their union. It is hyperbole. It is a joke. It is impossible. It is impossible for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, but that is easier than it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.

One other tradition of interpretation is to cast the rich young ruler as the problem. He is easily framed as arrogant and his questioning as adversarial. He is the cool and cocky pastor who glides up in a smoking-black Prius, and pushes his sunglasses back on his head as he approaches Jesus. Well dressed and well pressed he tells Jesus how totally awesome it is to be with him, and that he's been keeping the commandments, and that he is wondering what else Jesus wants him to do for this whole abundant life thing.....

And, Jesus puts him in his place.

And, again the issue is not his wealth, the issue is his attitude. Jesus sees that is his weak spot and so he tells the young man to sell his possessions, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow...

But, surely what Jesus said to him doesn't apply to others.  
We all have different weak spots.  
Jesus would say something different to us.

What Jesus says is not practical, or plausible, or possible.  
There must be a different way to tame this text.  
Let's go back text...

Mark simply says that a man ~ Matthew calls him young, Luke names him a ruler ~ ran up to Jesus, fell on his knees, and with a term of great respect asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. Now, there is no need to dismiss or diminish the man. He wasn't trying to trick or trap Jesus. It reads that he was earnestly seeking an answer.

Arthur Ashe was a great and graceful tennis player, who in the course of heart surgery contracted AIDS from a blood transfusion. As his disease progressed and he was dying, he wrote a wonderful book, "Days of Grace." In it, Ashe recalls his first by-pass surgery and the decision to retire from playing tennis. He experienced a sense of uneasiness and restlessness. He writes:

*How could I be dissatisfied, even subtly, with my life to that point? I had lived a fantasy of a life. But I was dissatisfied. Who knows what force gnaws at us, telling us that our accomplishments, no matter how sensational, are not enough, that we need to do more?*

The man comes to Jesus asking about life. He had great wealth and he had kept the commandments, but he knew that whatever he had been doing wasn't the ticket to eternal life. He doesn't come to Jesus unless he had some sense that there was something missing, there was something gnawing at him, there was something that he was still looking for....

Jesus questions him about the commandments and ticks off a list ~ oddly enough leaving off the one about coveting. The man responds that he had kept the commandments since he was a child. And then, there is a beautiful line that is only recorded in Mark:

*Jesus looked at him and loved him.*

Through the eyes of love Jesus says there is only one thing that you lack.

*Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor,....  
And then come, follow me.*

You know what happens next. We would do the same. His face fell and he went away grieved. Now, there is no line that he "lived unhappily ever after." There is no follow up, that he came back the next day after selling the lake house and cashing in his 401K. There is no evidence that he responded, "I know they say it is better to be poor and happy than rich and miserable, but how about a compromise like moderately rich and just moody?" There is nothing more about the man.

The text turns to the disciples, because they were amazed.

Wealth was a sign of God's blessing.

Wealth was a sign that you were right with God.

Wealth was a sign of the abundance of God.

Wealth was a sign of life.

Wealth was a sign of faithfulness.

So, the disciples were stunned. This was incredulous. This was impossible. If the rich couldn't enter into the kingdom than who could? Certainly not the poor, or the last, or the least... That is not the way the world works.

And then, blustery impulsive Peter butts in, "Look we left everything to follow you!"  
What more are we to do?

Dear friends, I can't tame this text.

I can proclaim that with human beings this is impossible, but not with God. All things are possible with God." Thanks be to God. But, I can't seem to fit this text into the container of heart, or attitude, or spirituality.

Your wealth won't insure abundant life.

Your piety won't insure abundant life.

Your obedience won't insure abundant life.

So, who can get in?

Who can have eternal life?

Who can squeeze through?

Again, it comes down to what God will do.

It comes down to grace.

We're empty handed.

I have a nagging notion that this has more to do with money than we'd care to admit. Even though wealth is relative ~ I have a nagging notion that we're possessed by our possessions. I know that I am. Lamar Williamson puts it this way:

*After we have done our best to make this text say something less upsetting to our system of values, Jesus looks intently at us (loves us) and continues quietly to affirm that life is to be had not by accumulating things, but by disencumbering ourselves. Contrary to the dominant voices of our culture, but in keeping with the entire section on discipleship in Mark, this text proclaims the good news that the way to be really rich is to die to wealth.*

*If this message doesn't take our breath away, if we are not shocked, appalled, grieved, or amazed, we have either not heard it or heard it so often that we don't really hear it anymore.*

Jesus looks at each of us with love.

May we follow in love and freedom even an untamable text.

Amen.